

Rule-Following Revisited

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Wittgenstein, like any other charismatic thinker, continues to attract fanatics who devote their life to disagreeing with one another ...about the ultimate meaning of his words. These disciples cling myopically to their Wittgenstein, not realizing that there are many great Wittgensteins to choose from. (Daniel Dennett, *Time* magazine, 2000)

I am, I admit, a fanatic: I would like to find out the meaning of Wittgenstein's words. (Even their *ultimate* meaning, if that's different.) Today I'm going to discuss the "rule-following considerations", *Philosophical Investigations* §§185-242. Those considerations were first marked out as of crucial significance in Michael Dummett's 1959 essay on Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics; but the amount of discussion of them exploded after the publication of Saul Kripke's book in 1982. That discussion did not generate much consensus, and there hasn't been as much activity about them of late. There does seem to be continued interest, though, as evidenced by the publication in 2002 of an anthology of earlier papers (Alexander Miller and Crispin Wright, eds., *Rule-Following and Meaning*, Accenture Press, 2002). What is striking about most of those papers is the absence of focus on the text of the *Investigations*. Paragraphs were cited, to be sure, but there was little by way of sustained reading or attention to how the text is structured.

My aim today is to try to formulate a little more clearly than I have found in the literature what is going on in these sections of the *Investigations*, and to integrate a general view of what Wittgenstein is up to with closer textual examinations. (Much

of what I'll say is not new, and bears in its general themes at least a strong (family?) resemblance to points others have made.)

The rule-following considerations begin in *PI* §185 with the parable of the Wayward Child. We give the child a rule, "Add 2," and she carries on just fine until she hits 1000. Then she continues with "1004, 1008, 112, etc. She has given every indication of understanding the number system, understanding what commands are, and the like. And up to 1000 she goes on in a way that is perfectly correct; but she does something quite odd starting at 1000. Moreover, the Wayward Child doesn't see that she's doing anything different. So Wittgenstein asks, What do we do to get the child to see? If she insists that she's going on as before, going on as she should,¹ we come to see that there's nothing in all the explanations and examples we had given before, which had sufficed to get her to proceed correctly up to 1000, which rules out her way of going on.

So that's the parable. The question is: What is it meant to show? After all, it's a not uncommon experience to discover that someone whom we thought understood us turns out not to understand us after all. Everything that the person has done heretofore gives us no reason to doubt whether they understand, but they suddenly do something that shows that, for all that, they don't. Less common, but perhaps not totally unusual, we see cases in which no explanation seems to work. But obviously Wittgenstein is giving a bizarre case. The child doesn't get the idea of "adding 2", even though she evinced a complete understanding up until 1000. The child simply disagrees with our judgment of what "going on the same" is. What can we do? We can throw up our hands and say that she is just incapable of understanding what we mean and send her home (or to a psychologist), or we can *force* her to continue in the way we prefer.

¹ Anscombe translates "so *soll's* ich machen" as "how I was *meant* to do it", but this premature appearance of an idea of "meaning" undercuts the point of the following section, §186.

Of course the Parable is meant to evoke a further response. It's meant to be disquieting. Our examples or explanations do not suffice to rule out the child's response. The disquiet, then, goes this way: what the Parable shows is that there is nothing in anything we can say about the rule that forces the continuation to go one way rather than another, and so there is always a question whether the child understands. At any given point, when someone appears as though they've gotten the rule, subsequent events could show that she haven't. Hence at any point there is always a question: Has she gotten the rule? All that we have to go on are particular finite manifestations, and so there can never be any assurance that the person actually has gotten the rule.

But then this worry leads to the question: What tells us that *we're* going on in the right way? Nothing we've said rules out the child's response; how is it that we are confident that *we* have the right answer? What is the source of our authority if it cannot be *conclusively stated*?

There are various directions in which this question might be taken. There is an epistemological way: How does anyone *know* what going on in the right way is? How can we tell when someone has got it correctly? (CrispinWright's rendition seems to go in this direction.) But this doesn't seem to me the right question. For to ask after the source of our authority is also to raise the question of what sets up what is right or wrong, in accordance with the rule or not, *at all*: what gives *content* to the judgment of right or wrong, and what power it has. Given that the examples and the explanations don't seem to force one way on us, how does anything count as correct or incorrect? This is a question of the *constitution* of correctness. It does not concern our justification in taking ourselves to be right; the example is not meant to shake our *confidence* that we are right when we proceed in a particular way, but rather to get us to ask what it is to *say* that we are right.

Wittgenstein indicates that this is the question in the first two sentences of

§186, where the Interlocutor says: “What you are saying, then, comes to this: a new insight—intuition—is needed at every step to carry out the order ‘+n’ correctly.” The Interlocutor is expressing the epistemological worry: how is it, given that there is a correct or incorrect way of proceeding, that I access it? Wittgenstein responds: “To carry it out correctly! How is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular stage?” So he is saying that the worry is precisely that of the constitution of correctness.

So the initial disquiet is: given a finite amount of behavior, there is always a question about whether the rule is understood. This naturally becomes even more unsettling: since any finite amount of behavior (examples and explanations) is consistent with different ways of going on, hence there is always a question of what *makes* one of those ways correct.

That’s the reaction on which both Dummett and Kripke build their interpretations. Dummett takes it very seriously and concludes that there is nothing in the specification of the rule, along with the previous actions in accord with the rule, that determines anything or that has any hold on us. At any point, you can always go on in any way that you like and be in accordance with the specification of the rule. Every new step is a *decision* to apply the specified rule in a particular way. That is, Dummett views Wittgenstein as a “radical conventionalist.” We could have gone on otherwise; and there is nothing that would have made what we did before either in accord or not in accord with our current application. Nothing about our going on “2, 4, 6, 8,” etc., up to “998, 1000,” makes any continuation after “1000” more or less in accord with the rule that we frame as “Add 2.” Because there is nothing in our understanding of the rules that makes it correct to go on in one way rather than another. Hence we simply *choose* one way of going on, and call it the correct one.

To my eye Kripke starts the same way. He takes the point of the Parable to be the idea that there is no *fact* as to which continuation is the correct one. Both

responses can be called “anti-realist.” Each is an elaboration on the idea that there is nothing “out there in reality” that determines what is the right continuation.

These readings build on the reaction to the parable that starts by saying that there is *always* a question about whether a person understands a rule (since you have only a finite amount of behavior, and the rule has infinitely many applications). To be sure, Wittgenstein intends to elicit that reaction, but I take it that he also means us to *question* it. For there is a contrast between what we’re inclined to say after considering the Parable—that even in the ordinary situation, with no waywardness or deviance involved, there’s always a question about whether a person “really” understands—and the plain fact that ordinarily *there is no question*. In everyday life, when people operate, we take it that they are understanding rules and following them in the ordinary sense. So, given such a contrast between the “ordinary” fact and the thing we’re inclined to say upon philosophical consideration of the Parable, we should ask whether in the latter we are putting a demand on rules that operates in abstraction from how we *actually* operate with rules. Wittgenstein, I believe, wants us to feel this contrast in order to suggest that we are lodging a demand that rules are to operate in some sense absolutely and unconditionally, and he means us to scrutinize it. Wittgenstein takes it that it is easy to think that this standard of unconditioned correctness is already there, and that we can take it as given. That is what he wants us to start to consider. (That is, Dummett and Kripke stop too soon. They stand fast with the skeptical reaction and don’t investigate its sources; but that is precisely what Wittgenstein is trying to get us to do.)

That something fishy is going on is perhaps indicated in §186, when the Interlocutor responds to Wittgenstein’s question “How is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular stage?” with “The right step is the one that accords with the order—as it was *meant*.” For as an answer, that is both right and wrong. Of course, how you mean an order tells you what it is to follow it correctly. In the right

tone of voice, this is the merest commonplace, and completely anodyne. But the Interlocutor's response is wrong, or misleading, or wrongheaded, insofar as it conceives the notion of how the order is meant as self-sufficient, as in and of itself mandating each particular response. That self-sufficiency is central to what the Interlocutor is trying to do here: getting some notion of the rule itself to establish a standard of correctness, as doing something beyond some particular explanation or example.

But if how we mean the rule does nothing more than a *particular* explanation can do, it can look as though there can be no constitution of correctionness. You could make *any* continuation the correct one. In short, if what Wittgenstein is saying in these sections is trying to debunk the idea that how one means a rule is going to give you some notion of unconditioned determination of the correct continuation, then that whole process can make the carrying out of the steps look *groundless*—there being *no* grounds for going in one way rather than in another. He ends §186 with “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.” And that, of course, leads to Dummett's radical conventionalism, if one leaves out the “almost”.² Why does Dummett ignore the “almost”? It goes like this, I think: Wittgenstein is undermining the notion of the *grounds* for the continuation. So then, the obvious reaction is to say that the continuation is *groundless*. That is the road Dummett is taking. But I think it is better to try to read Wittgenstein as doing something else, which is admittedly hard to make out: to undermine the notion of *groundlessness* at the same time that he is undermining a certain notion of grounds. He thinks that we have a philosophical (metaphysical) idea of the grounds for correct continuation, but to undermine that notion is not to undermine a notion of grounds in the ordinary sense. It *is* to undermine the back-and-forth between grounds and groundlessness in some such philosophical

² One also has to leave out §219, “When I obey a rule, I do not choose.”

sense.

If this is on the right track, Wittgenstein is trying to undermine exactly the notion of groundlessness that Dummett thinks he is getting from Wittgenstein. Dummett thinks that we are in some sort of precarious position because the meaning, the content, of the rule (of logic), do not give us the sort of philosophical ground that we sought. Wittgenstein is trying to say that there is no self-sufficient, unconditional support of this sort, but that that should not lead us to think that we are in some sort of groundless position.

As I indicated before, that at stake is a puffed-up philosophical idea of grounds, the unconditioned constitution of correctness, is suggested by §186. At issue, at always, is the question, What are the facts of everyday practice? What features of cases, in which I would describe myself as meaning this rule in such-and-such a way, are actually used *in practice* to back up a claim about how to go on? How would I answer an actually-arising question of “how I meant the rule”? And what features of that lead to the idea that there is something available in all cases to ground the notion of correctness? As always, Wittgenstein wants to suggest how we too quickly take cases like the ordinary ones (which we are meant to make explicit) to provide general support for a philosophical notion of correctness. I can, after all, describe myself as knowing what the correct continuation is after any particular number. I intend the rule “Add 2” in a particular way; and then it is correct to say that I know what the correct continuation is. And it is even unobjectionable to describe myself in the following way: When I said “Add 2,” I *meant* that, after ‘1000’, you should write ‘1002’.

— That all seems correct and commonplace. Wittgenstein is asking why we think that that gives any *general* answer to the notion of how correctness is constituted. The accuracy of the description, “I meant that you should write ‘1002’ after ‘1000’,” *depends* on my knowing what the rule is; it does not give it any independent support. We can describe ourselves as knowing what the correct continuation was, and it is

consequent on that that we would describe ourselves as *meaning* that ‘1002’ was to be written after ‘1000’. But it gives us nothing more. And Wittgenstein may be trying to point this out by reminding us that there is no *particular* fact to me that amounts to my knowing that ‘1002’ is to be written after ‘1000’. If there were, then presumably there would need to be another fact that amounted to my knowing that ‘1004’ is the correct continuation after ‘1002’, etc. And that is clearly not the case. It is not any locatable fact that gives us the sense of “what it is to know” all of this.

In any case, in talking generally about how one means the formula as determining how to go on, in the tone of voice that comes out in the Interlocutor’s remarks in §186, it seems that the Interlocutor is trying to get at some sense of meaning that gets *behind* any extra explanations one would use or any extra expressions that one would actually write down—something that underlies any possible explanation. It is *that* which the Interlocutor thinks would *really* determine how to go on. In the philosophical tone of voice, how you mean the sign is meant to be beyond anything that could be captured by a mere expression. The Interlocutor is not interested in just getting one more *expression* of how you meant something, for after all, that will not get you any further in the quest for what really determines how you go on. What the Interlocutor wants is something beyond the ordinary use of “meaning the formula.” That is what §188–90 are meant to point up, in these demands of the Interlocutor. We get metaphorical remarks, as in §188: “Here I should first of all like to say: your idea was that that act of meaning the order had in its own way already traversed all those steps: that when you meant it your mind as it were flew ahead and took all the steps before you physically arrived at this or that one.” §189–190 focuses on the relation of determination between how the rule is meant and the way of going on, and explicitly contrast good and bad ways of taking that notion. These sections are meant to point up that the Interlocutor is placing a metaphysical demand on the grounding: as the self-sufficient item that does all the work in determining the

continuation. [cf. §195]

This is essential background to the “paradox” of §§198-201. “But how can a rule shew me what I have to do at *this* point? Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the rule.” Wittgenstein responds: “That is not what we ought to say, but rather: any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support.” The response *seems* to make matters worse. But note that it pointedly lacks the notion of “accord with the rule”. The Interlocutor thinks we can have different interpretations of the rule that *determine* different continuations. Wittgenstein is saying that that is mistaken. “Any interpretation still hangs in the air.” The Interlocutor is using the idea of interpretations to make the any one continuation look groundless. But Wittgenstein is saying that what makes it look groundless is already incorporated into the idea that we have multiple determination. It is the idea of *determination* that is incoherent. The Interlocutor has already brought too much into the picture. It is as though we had an idea of *the* unconditioned determination of the correct continuation. You want to rule to do that; you see that the rule does not do that; so you conclude that the rule-plus-interpretation must do that. But then you have different interpretations, and so you get the conclusion that the continuation is groundless. That is what the Interlocutor is doing; and Wittgenstein’s retort is an expression of the point that there is an illicit notion of determination that underlies the Interlocutor’s entire progress in the dialectic.

Now the Interlocutor is confused by this (unsurprisingly). So should we be. She says, “Then can whatever I do be brought in accord with the rule?” Wittgenstein turns that question aside for the moment, in his maddening way. Instead he gives a counter-story, so to speak: that there are connections between the expression of the rule and the ways that we actually go on with the rule. So, he suggests, when we talk about following a rule, we are making essential reference to our *practices*. We would not call anything “acting on a rule” without these institutions and practices; and

indeed, the possibility of different interpretations rests on this. It does all hang in the air without the background of acting on rules. Without the actual actions of people engaging in what we call “acting on a rule,” there would be nothing about a rule that would give us anything.

In §201, Wittgenstein returns to the unanswered question of §198: “Can whatever I do be brought into accord with the rule?” He says, “This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.”—That’s an answer to the paradox? It seems to be an even more drastic *restatement* of the paradox. Indeed, there is a “flat” way of taking the paradox, namely, that it *does* show that there really is no accord and no conflict. One way of summarizing Kripke and Dummett is that they do precisely that. But to take Wittgenstein’s response in that way is to mistake the play-within-the-play for the play itself, as David Pears wrote. The paradox arises given an agenda; what Wittgenstein wants to do is to unravel the agenda, not to conclude that one actually gets a paradox. That is indicated by the oddity in the way that the answer is framed. One might say that framing the paradox requires use of the notion of accord or correctness. The paradox pretends to show that that notion is not good enough, or not what we want; but the answer suggests that the notion employed is puffed up at the start.

The paradox can be formulated as “Anything could be correct.” So it is stated as though we already have the notion of correctness, and we see that it is defective because it is not determinative. Wittgenstein’s answer is that there is no notion of correctness of the sort the interlocutor intends. What it is to obey a rule is not something that can come from within, from some idea of *content*. Rather, it comes from what we call following a rule: from our practices. But it is not *grounded* in

anything.

The misunderstanding that engenders the paradox, Wittgenstein goes on to say, is the odd use that is being made of the notion of the *interpretation* of the rule. The original idea was that any possible next step *could* be in accord with the rule on some interpretation; this presumably points to the need for interpretation. Then we think that when we take a step, it evidences both the rule and our having made an interpretation of the rule. But if *that* is the case, then one can always raise the question of interpretation again. Does our taking the step evidence an interpretation of the interpretation of the rule?

The paradox of §201 arises out of a demand placed on our conception of rules; the demand of operating in a vacuum—of setting up a standard of correctness in and of itself. And that demand is reflected in the tone of voice that we adopt in talking about how the rule determines how to go on, and in the felt need for an explanation of how we go from the rule to the steps that we take in particular circumstances. This demand issues in the construal of following a rule as *requiring* an interpretation of the rule. Then Wittgenstein employs the usual “third man” argument: an interpretation will itself require interpretation, and so on ad infinitum. Nothing of the sort that we are looking for will be available to fill the bill. Wittgenstein wants to point to the crucial first step: that of thinking that our next application of the rule amounts to an interpretation. That is where the slippage comes in.

Now the problem here, as often with certain Wittgensteinian strictures, is that there certainly are particular cases in which what Wittgenstein is warning against is perfectly intelligible and correct. There are cases in which it is perfectly unobjectionable to say that someone interpreted the rule in a certain way, and that is why she went on in that way. The question, though, is always one of what we are exploiting that talk of interpretation to do, when used generally. The subtlety here lies in trying to depict what it is to put the *metaphysical* demand on the conception of

rules into this notion of interpretation. Wittgenstein thus wants to issue reminders about what work the notion of interpretation does ordinarily.

So one ought to ask at this point: When does one invoke the notion of interpretation ordinarily? If I say, “Continue the series that begins with 2,4,6,8,10,...,” and you go on with “12,14,16,18,20,” then it sounds odd to say that what you have done is to *interpret* the rule. But now we are to imagine the *philosophical* interlocutor, who says, “I *might* have gone on differently. Does that not show that when I went on as I did in the ordinary way, I chose an interpretation? Doesn’t the possibility that I could have gone on differently show that I must have done so?” In fact, that is exactly what Wittgenstein is responding to in §213:

“But this initial segment of a series obviously admitted of various interpretations (e.g. by means of algebraic expressions) and so you must first have chosen one such interpretation.”—Not at all. A doubt was possible in certain circumstances. But that is not to say that I did doubt, or even could doubt.

The solution is to jettison the talk of interpretation as always being operative. Wittgenstein points out how the notion of interpretation can arise in certain circumstances; but he urges that it is a misstep to take it as always operating. We could put it like this: In odd cases, in which there might be some confusion or unclarity, we might ask questions about how someone is interpreting a rule. There is a move then to the idea that *every* time one acts in accordance with the rule, one is, *implicitly or unconsciously* interpreting it. But we talk about interpretations in cases where some question or ambiguity arises. (This notion of interpretation is similar to the idea that “the way you mean the rule” determines correct continuation as it was used in the Interlocutor’s first gambit in §186.) If you pay attention to when we say that interpretation *is* operative in certain circumstances, you will see it does *not* go

deeper; it does not connect us with some level that is determinative. It does not function in any way to *ground* the following of the rule. The lesson is: “What gets us from the rules to the steps as actually taken?” is then misguided. If you ask, “On what is our following the rule this way rather than that based?” then Wittgenstein would want to reply, “In one sense nothing. There is no *thing* on which it is based.” But that is not to say that it is groundless. What makes a continuation in accord with the rule? *Sometimes* one can respond to that question by giving an interpretation, sometimes by giving a particular explanation relevant to the case at hand, sometimes by telling you how I understand or meant the rule. Along with those practices are the agreements that shore up when there is nothing more to say: when we are supposed to be able to elaborate, and when we are not. As Wittgenstein puts it at §217, “If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned.” But the agreements that shore up when we *have* reached bedrock—when there is no further explanation we could give, and when that is accepted—are also part of these practices. Again, it is the picture of there being a full and final story to tell as operative in each instance that leads to the picture of interpretation as something definite and final. That picture creates burdens that we think interpretation has to bear, and then we see that it cannot bear them—which leads to the paradox. It is that diagnosis that lies behind Wittgenstein’s saying what he does in §201b. Wittgenstein here is trying to diagnose the push to the idea that there is a full and final story to tell.

If you see that no interpretation can bear this burden, but you keep the idea that there is a full and final story to tell, then you will get the idea of radical conventionalism. The conventionalist sees that there is no notion of interpretation that can play the decisive determinant; and so he substitutes choice, or decision, as the decisive determinant. But Wittgenstein is clear that that could not be the correct way to go. Part and parcel of talking about there being nothing more to say—no

further justification, no interpretation—is that I do not in any sense “choose” how to go on. Wittgenstein is more explicit about this on p. 143 of the *Brown Book*:

It is no act of insight, intuition, which makes us use the rule as we do at the particular point of the series. It would be less confusing to call it an act of decision, though this too is misleading, for nothing like an act of decision must take place, but possibly just an act of writing or speaking. And the mistake which we here and in a thousand similar cases are inclined to make is labeled by the word ‘to make’ as we have used it in the sentence ‘It is no act of insight which makes us use the rule as we do’, because there is an idea that “something must make us” do what we do.

That is a cruder way of putting it; it lacks the kind of elegance and gnarled depth of the way he put it in the *Investigations*. But it gives us the right point: it is the idea is that something must make us, that there is a decisive determinant, that must be challenged.

The bottom line of all this is that we are barking our way up the wrong gum tree. We are asking for a role that is not taken by anything that looks like interpretation as that notion ordinarily functions. As Wittgenstein says, “There is a way of grasping a rule which is *not an interpretation*.” The bottom line is that grasping a rule is grasping a rule. There is no further general story. It is exhibited in our shared standards of correctness in what we call obeying a rule or not. But there is nothing from which our practices flow. Practices, customs, institutions must be granted: they are not eliminable through the notion of rule-following. The error lies in thinking that you *can* get a notion of following a rule while prescind from those practices.

Following directly on the heels of his response to the paradox in §201, Wittgenstein seems to draw a conclusion a dramatic conclusion. In §202 he says,

And hence also ‘obeying a rule’ is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule

‘privately’: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.

This has the appearance of a nearly deductive argument, but what is meant by “privately”? (*privatim*) After all, in an ordinary sense I *do* obey a lot of rules privately. One need not possess a very lurid imagination to conceive of this. Clearly this ordinary notion cannot be the sense of privacy that Wittgenstein means. (No commentators except Stanley Cavell have remarked on the existence of an ordinary notion here that would confound what Wittgenstein is saying.)

The way in which Wittgenstein uses “privacy” later, starting in §243, concerns the mental life: immediate private sensations. It doesn’t appear that *that* notion of privacy is operative in §202.³ I take it that Wittgenstein wants to keep to the level of something that one has “by oneself” that could furnish the grounds for fixity and determinateness that was being sought. It is thus a reaction to the paradox of §201; and ‘privately’ here might just be my doing and saying certain things when called on to explain why I am acting as I am: “I’m just doing it *my* way, in the way based on me. I have a principle, but it is only for me, for my use. There is nothing more I can say to explain why it is that this is following the rule.”—Now that, put in the right way (that I *cannot* explain), makes the incoherence more obvious. It simply is *not* following a rule, if that’s all you have to say about it.

What is fueling the point in §202 has to do with what I called the constitution of correctness. One is led to talk of private rules because one thinks that they can do this constitution. The argument that it does not make sense to speak of private rules is based on the idea that this is the role one *wanted* the rule to play philosophically; but once you say that the space of reasons is private, it cannot play that role. The notion of private rules as doing the metaphysical work of establishing a standard of

³ Kripke does take the “private” of §202 to be the same as that of the private language argument of §§243ff., but in so doing divorces the latter from consideration of sensation-language. See my “Kripke on Wittgenstein on Rules” (*Journal of Philosophy*, 1985).

correctness does not make sense. And that opens the way to saying that it makes perfect sense to speak, in the ordinary way, of obeying private rules. Wittgenstein is talking about private rules as doing the kind of constitutive work that the metaphysical demand places upon them. That is why the notion of private rules comes up in the context of the discussion of what determines the correct application of a rule.

The incoherence arises from the impossibility of distinguishing, from *within*, the correct continuation from any continuation that you wind up making. But this incoherence does not rest on any verificationist premise. It rather has to do with the notion of what a private rule is to be used for, as at §202: something like an ultimate explanation of our practices. If that is the way that it is used, then the private rule cannot do the job. It cannot serve as the basis upon which all else rests. The private rule cannot provide a yardstick — beyond the empty assertion that I will do what I do. (So to speak, Wittgenstein is reminding his implicit interlocutor of what his aim was supposed to have been. Note that Wittgenstein is not first showing that rule-following is essentially social, and then deducing that private rule-following is impossible.)

In §§198-202, there is an increasing drumbeat: obeying rules is a “custom”, a “use”, an “institution”, a “practice”. Of course, obeying any particular rule is a practice, a use (and sometimes a custom), but naturally Wittgenstein means more. At it most general: rule-following makes sense only given our practices, customs, institutions. It is to be hoped that we have given some sense to what Wittgenstein is *denying* here: the way in which we have the constitution of correctness, which does not come from anything like “the meaning of the rule” or “an interpretation of the rule”. But the role of practices is easy to misstate, and it is often misstated.

First, though, let me interject a thought. By “uses”, “customs”, etc. we do not simply want to take into account our judgments as to what is in accord with the rule

and what is not. (In the case of the rule “Add 2,” the only practice Wittgenstein explicitly mentions to is the giving the series of integers.) Many commentators take customs and practices to be *thin*: to be just our various acceptances and rejections of certain ways of going on as correct. This does not seem to me to do justice to the words ‘custom’ etc., which suggest that more is at issue than the simple applications or goings-on with the rule, or our acceptance of certain steps as being in accordance with the rule. (I would suggest that this oversimplification of practices is connected with all of the bad ways of thinking about these problems—again, with the views of our *bêtes noires*. For if the practices are just limited, say, to giving sums, then they look too thin and weak to provide much of anything towards the correctness of going on in one way rather than another. And then it seems as though we *are* unfettered: there are no facts, so we must decide. Wittgenstein is, I think, talking about all the background—all of how we deal with rules—as being part of the institutions, customs, and practices. For example, this includes the practice of when we think you must justify going on in one way rather than another; what sorts of explanations will satisfy us; what sorts do not.

Now, to say, that rule-following makes sense only *given* our practices and customs, is fine. In §199-200 we are directed towards thinking of how little sense we would be able to make of obeying rules without adverting to practices. But Wittgenstein’s quarry is something like the unconditioned grounding of rule-following, the standard of correctness being constituted in an unconditioned way. The subtle thing is to appreciate how Wittgenstein wants to get rid of this *without* putting anything in its place. It is not that correctness or determination by the rule is *constituted* by our practices.

And one sometimes finds descriptions of Wittgenstein’s reliance on practices that seem to do just this: instead of attacking the *role* of determination, they put institutions, practices, in that role. (“It is not the meaning of the rule in abstraction

from us and our practices: it is the *practices* that do that.”) We saw that the radical conventionalist sees that nothing provides the grounding for following rules, and so puts in decision; the communitarian, now, sees that nothing in abstraction from our practices fills the bill, and so puts in community. And indeed, it is hard to avoid, hard to get rid of the idea that ‘ “something must make us” do what we do’ (in the words of the *Brown Book*). It can look as if what we are doing is to say that, since we have no notion of determination of the sort that the Interlocutor imagined, it must be the *community*. The community winds up playing the same role. The communitarian’s is a *subtler* mistake, but it is a mistake nonetheless.

The difficulty in avoiding falling into this can be seen in Malcolm’s account of rule following (Chapter IX of *Nothing is Hidden*) “what fixes the meaning of a rule is *our customary way of applying the rule in particular cases.*”⁴

Many of the remarks in the *Investigations* in the stretch §§204–242 are meant to indicate that we are not to put the community where the grounding of rules was supposed to be, but rather to jettison the idea of grounding rule-following; and get us to see that in the talk of practices, institutions, etc., there is no constituting a standard of correctness in the sense in which the Interlocutor wanted one.

Particularly important among the institutions, customs, and practices, are our ways of justifying ourselves when we go on in a certain way, how we explain ourselves. Earlier in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein begins to expose and attack a philosophical picture of unconditioned justification. This figures, most prominently, in sections around §80, in connection with the notion of meaning. In our sections, in the early 200s, this picture of justification is being put in contact with what the Interlocutor wants by way of constitution of correctness, when we consider justifying

⁴ For criticism of Malcolm, see Edward Minar, *Wittgenstein and the “Contingency” of Community* (Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, 1991). Centrally: Malcolm’s view simply doesn’t work to answer any of the doubts of §185, and it ignores the “thick” practices that are vital to explain rules, and so fix their meaning. Similar criticisms would apply to those who take Wittgenstein to have a “social theory of meaning.”

how we go on in accord with the rule. Wittgenstein is here eliciting the idea that what we are ultimately bound to do, in following the rule, is that for which there would be a full and ultimate justification of that's being the correct continuation. The full justification is one that rules out all counter-possibilities, all alternative ways of going on. That is the picture of justification that Wittgenstein wants to undermine.

In §§203–42 Wittgenstein calls our attention to actual practices of justification and explanation. He points out that these function in certain ways in our lives, in order to expose the philosophical leap from commonsense characterizations of how we justify our claims to the philosophical picture. This is the picture of a complete story that would serve, in all possible circumstances; and when we actually offer explanations or justifications in a particular context, we are just taking one clause from this full story, the one relevant to the particular case. (To most philosophers, that's just what "justification" means. But to Wittgenstein it is just the sort of preconception that lies deeply in back of many philosophical blind alleys.) Wittgenstein wants to say that there is a leap there from our ordinary practices to a philosophical picture. By more closely attending to our actual practices, he wants us to see how taking what we do as justifications depends on their answering only what comes up in a particular situation and then stopping.

The first occurrence of a consideration like this comes in §87, where Wittgenstein asks, "But then how does an explanation help me to understand, if after all it is not the final one? In that case the explanation is never completed; so I still don't understand what he means, and never shall!" Wittgenstein is there pushing the picture of justification to the point at which one will not be able to get satisfaction. He responds to this as follows:

As though an explanation as it were hung in the air unless supported by another one. Whereas an explanation may indeed rest on another one that has been given, but none stands in need of another—unless *we* require it to prevent a misunderstanding. One might say: an

explanation serves to remove or to avert a misunderstanding—one, that is, that would occur but for the explanation; not every one that I can imagine.

One particular aspect of the general picture of justification and doubt connects with the question of the role of practices in the rule-following considerations. Let us go back to the paradox of §201, and let us (once again!) retrace how it can operate to move us to radical conventionalism or scepticism. We give a rule, and in some cases in its application, perhaps an explanation of the rule. But for all that, Wittgenstein says, one could go on in different ways and yet take oneself to be doing the same thing. Because of this we seem to be in a position of admitting that we cannot say what “going on in the same way” is by means of the rule or an explanation. Here we get the idea that I cannot represent what I understand by going on in the same way at all. I cannot represent it because any representation I give is just one more explanation, and can leave matters up in the air in just the same way. That leads to the paradox: nothing works to give us how to go on, so in principle we cannot be bound by anything.

In this, it appears that what I want is something that explains how to go on, what the correct continuation is—not something that in fact *works* to explain to some *person* how to go on. Usually, I give you examples and you will go on, or I will tell you various things about how to go on, and you will go on. But that is not what we wanted when we were in this mood. Wittgenstein shows that there are many ways of going on; and so we are inclined to conclude that we need something that picks out the correct continuation, but not in the way that our explanations in ordinary life pick it out. We do not want something that gets people to go on in the right way, but something that absolutely picks out for any possible audience the right continuation from all the possible continuations.

Now in certain contexts there might be a question. If I give you the series 3,5,7, and ask you to go on, you may go on 9,11,13,15,17,...(the odds), or you may go on

11,13,17,19,...(the primes). Here we can say what we mean by “going on in the same way.” I can say, “I meant that you should go on by giving odds, not primes.” And then you can go on in the same way. If you were wrong in a particular case, I could say how you were wrong; and I can justify to another person why I say that you were wrong. What is driving matters for any of the Interlocutors is that she wants to know how I might justify *any* claim that I might make that something has gone wrong in *any* way in which the rule-follower might operate. She wants something in which the pupil’s going wrong really consisted: a determination of going on the same such that any imaginable way of going on was either included or excluded. The Interlocutor wants an account addressed to someone on whose responses we are not depending, as Cora Diamond has put it. We want an account that will suffice when we are not allowed to depend upon the fact that the learner is a human being, an account that makes clear how it is fixed out of all possible continuations which is the one we are meant to obey. That is the picture of justification that is under attack. And that is the way of reading the lesson of the paradox: To conclude that since there are other possibilities, the notion of rules determining how to go on is undermined, is to accept the picture of ultimate binding that Wittgenstein attacks. What is under attack is the idea that there is some role for such explanations, and that rule-following is somehow ungrounded unless we get such an account.

All this is going on in §213: “But this initial segment of a series obviously admitted of various interpretations (e.g. by means of algebraic expressions) and so you must first have chosen *one* such interpretation.”—Not at all.” That is already a bad picture: just because certain things were *possible*, it does not follow that you must have chosen a certain interpretation. And then Wittgenstein immediately passes to “A doubt was possible in certain circumstances. But that is not to say that I did doubt, or even could doubt.” He is making a connection here between a realm of philosophical ideas (doubt, justification, explanation) and the thing that is moving the

paradox, concerning the matter of needing to choose an interpretation to single out the right course of action from all of the possibilities. He is saying that the mere presence of alternative continuations, and so the mere conceivability of doubt as to how to go on, does not imply that there *is* doubt, or that doubt needs to be ruled out. There may be no doubt about how to go on, no need for explanation, and hence no “real alternatives”. What he is warning against is to look for a kind of explanation that does not rely on the responses of the other. (Here it is apposite to quote a passage from the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* VI §17, that is highlighted in Cora Diamond’s “Realism and the Realistic Spirit”:

I can train someone in a *uniform* activity. E.g. in drawing a line like this with a pencil on paper:



Now I ask myself, what is it that I want him to do, then? The answer is: He is always to go on as I have shewn him. And what do I really mean by: he is always to go on in that way? The best answer to this that I can give myself, is an example like the one I have just given.

I would use this example in order to shew him, and *also* to shew myself, what I mean by uniform.

We talk and act. That is already presupposed in everything that I am saying.

That is exemplary of the idea that, in talking about explanations, we are really talking about explanations’ relying on the uptake of others.) For there is no non-question-begging *other* way to explain “more fully”.

That is the essence, as I see it, of the rule-following sections. I hope this begins to give some sense to “reliance on practice” that we want to articulate in what rule-following comes to. In §206 Wittgenstein says, “The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.” The *system of reference*: again, this is to lead us away from the idea of practices as

constituting correctness. It is by reference to the complete totality of the ways we have of dealing with each other, that anything one wants to say about rule-following will have any sense. Wittgenstein means *all* of the background, *all* of how we deal with each other. (He uses “*menschliche Handlungsweise*” — not “*Benehmen*”.) All of that is included in the institutions and practices. Once one starts loading enough into “practices” and “institutions” to merit the term “*gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise*”, it should become clear that practices and institutions cannot play the kind of constitutive role that the Interlocutor was after. The category is too broad; there is too much in it. Much in it is not germane to any one particular rule, but to our behavior in general. And, of course, it already incorporates rule-following, and so cannot be its ground.

The point surfaces again in §208, in which he talks about teaching someone a notion of regularity. He says, “I influence him by expressions of agreement, rejection, expectation, encouragement. I let him go his way, or hold him back; and so on.” Here again we see the reliance on shared responses. And then he turns and asks, in §209, “Isn’t there a deeper explanation; or mustn’t at least the *understanding* of the explanation be deeper?” Of course, his answer is “No.” He wants to cut off the idea that somehow the explanation we give is sufficient for practical purposes, but that there must be something deeper that is not captured by any one explanation that I give, since those consist of just more sayings. Our understanding of what it is to go on in the same way is fully given by the explanations that we can give. But those explanations are entered for particular purposes, against a background of practices.

To reiterate: the person for whom the “paradox” of §201 arises is one who thinks that the standard of correctness must pick out something in the realm of “things that might possibly be meant,” where ‘possibly’ here means, not ‘possibly in human practice’, but something else. What I do when I *actually* explain works quite well, according to the Interlocutor. But she holds also that there must be something of

a different order that makes plain what all of the excluded possibilities are. When we see that nothing does this, the Interlocutor concludes that we have a paradox. The lesson of the paradox, then, is that there is a problem with this demand.

What leads to this dismissal of reliance on human responses? In trying to get us to give up the demand for the grounding of how the correct continuation is picked out from all of the possibilities, Wittgenstein wants to block the idea that the appeal to practices is superficial—that something in our practices points to something deeper or relies on something in back of them. This is one part of the agenda of §§203-242. A typical example is §210: “Every explanation which I can give myself I give to him too.”

In these sections Wittgenstein is also trying to bring out how the uses, customs, and institutions constitute the surroundings without which we could not make sense of rule-following (or, perhaps better put, could not make the kinds of sense of rule-following that we actually do). An example lies in §232:

Let us imagine a rule intimating to me which way I am to obey it; that is, as my eye travels along the line, a voice within me says: “*This way!*”
— What is the difference between this process of obeying a kind of inspiration and that of obeying a rule? For they are surely not the same.

We are asked to think of how we would distinguish these cases. (Wittgenstein particularly mentions teaching practices.) After bringing up a related example Wittgenstein says “This merely shows what goes to make up what we call ‘obeying a rule’ in everyday life” (§235). The point, of course, is to emphasize how embedded rule-following is in the common human ways of dealing with each other.

The punch line of Wittgenstein’s treatment of rule-following comes in §242:

If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments.

(Note: There is no ‘must’ in the original. The translation makes Wittgenstein sound as

if he is presenting some kind of transcendental argument. But, translated more literally, the sentence reads, “To communication and understanding by means of language there belongs agreement not only in definitions but also in judgments.” With no “must”, it is an observation that might (arguably) fall under what Wittgenstein calls “description” (§109).) The rhetoric is meant to shock. But he does not mean to rest anything on a sharp line between definitions and judgments. In fact, §242 is precisely trying to undermine that picture, which incorporates a sharp distinction between what is said within a framework (judgments) and what is said outside it and is constitutive of it (definitions). For if one had that picture, then one could certainly challenge the coherence of what Wittgenstein says. For how could it be a judgment if we agree that language relies on it? For if language relies on it, then it is impossible to deny it; it expresses no matter of fact. So if §242 actually relied on a sharp distinction between what is given by the framework of a language and what we say given that framework, then we could use the “basic insight” of the *Tractatus* to show that §242 can’t be right: if language depends on something, then that something cannot be *in* language, hence cannot be a judgment.

The obviousness of this objection is acknowledged when Wittgenstein says that what he is saying is “queer.” The objection itself, however, relies on taking there to be fixed content of our words in a strong sense: we first fix how language has content, and then we make claims in the language. But that is precisely the picture that Wittgenstein is against. He is not using words like ‘judgment’ from inside such a view of language. The judgments that he is talking about *can*, in certain circumstances, be real judgments: they are challengeable, open to debate, open to justification, learnable, etc. But the circumstances are all-important. On other occasions these things will not be at issue. Indeed, on other occasions they *cannot* be at issue. So if you like, you can say that we agree in those judgments. You might say that any one such agreement can be called into question; but the *texture* must remain the same if

the language is to function.

(Wittgenstein's remarks on rules of measurement at the end of §242 are to the point: "It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call 'measuring' is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement." Do not take the local distinction between the methods of measurement and the results of measurement as being expandable into a wholesale conception of rules of representation versus things represented; this implies that it is only *within* the rules of representation that we can have any notion of fact. To assume a sharp distinction between the rules and the represented is to make the crucial misstep that fuels the *Tractatus*.)

What sorts of agreements are these "agreements in judgment" that belong to language? This is a rather slippery question, since these are not agreements in any ordinary sense (which is indicated by the last sentence of §241: "That is not agreement in opinions but in forms of life"). Perhaps: whether a rule has been obeyed at a certain step; what counts as "the same" again, as in when two things are instances of the same rule; when one needs justification for saying that a rule has been obeyed; when justification is no longer at issue; how an example is to be taken. These agreements do not underlie rule-following; they are embedded in it (and perhaps, it in them): "The word 'agreement' and the word 'rule' are *related* to one another, they are cousins. If I teach anyone the use of the one word, he learns the use of the other with it." (§224)

Wittgenstein says that this seems to abolish logic. (What a terrible thing that would be!) Why does it seem to do so? No doubt because one hangs onto a view of logic that comes from Wittgenstein's past. On this view, logic is what one gets by dint of the representational structure of language. Now if you say that there is no such thing as a representational structure—that nothing belongs to language qua language, which fixes what is sayable within language—then the question arises: How

do we have logic? How do we have any distinction between rationality and merely what we do? Indeed, if one reads the sections between §203 and §242 from a certain angle, it can look as if Wittgenstein is saying only that logical compulsion consists merely in our doing things in a certain way: it is just a matter of our believing or holding something strongly. When he says things like, “When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule *blindly*,” he has been taken to suggest that that is all there is to it.

That is mistaken. The answer here is that there is no global grounding of logical compulsion. If we want to draw a distinction between rationality and inclinations, it lies only in the individual cases. We must look at what we actually do in making distinctions, in particular circumstances, between rationality and inclinations. And that is all that there is to it; anything else is a philosophical chimera.