

The rule-following problematic  
PI §§ 138-242

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Content of the *PI*

§§ 1-38 Language and meaning (as use)

The Augustinian picture

Language games

Ostensive definition

§§ 37-88 Names and the determinacy of sense

Family resemblance

§§ 89-133 "Chapter on Philosophy"

§§ 134-242 The rule-following considerations

§§ 243-315 "The private language argument"

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## What are rules?

- Rules are standards of correctness (normative, i.e. prescriptive, not descriptive of behaviour)
- There is a difference between a rule and its expression (a rule is not tied to a particular formulation)
- Rules are general, governing an often unlimited multiplicity of occasion (cf. orders or commands)
- There is a difference between following a rule and believing one is following a rule
- There is a difference in following a rule and merely acting in accordance with a rule (a rule is not a cause, but a reason for acting – intentionality is involved)
- "Rule" is a family-resemblance concept?

See Glock's Wittgenstein Dictionary

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## What is problematic about rules?

- What kind of entity are they? (ontological question)
- How do we grasp them? (epistemological question)
  - How can they guide action? (normative question)

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## But remember...

PI § 383: We do not analyse a phenomenon (for example, thinking) but a concept (for example, that of thinking), and hence the application of a word.

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Why are rules important for Wittgenstein?

TLP: logical syntax as system of rules for meaningful combination of signs

Middle period: language as a calculus

PI:

- Language is compared to games (involves following rules)
- “Meaning as use” (use has to be in some way regular)
- Conception of a philosophical investigation as a grammatical investigation (grammar is about rules of use)

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TLP: the possibility of picturing requires that there are rules of projection/translation that can be made explicit (but in our everyday language they function implicitly)  
see eg. 4.0141

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In the fact that there is a **general rule** by which the musician is able to read the symphony out of the score, and that there is **a rule** by which one could reconstruct the symphony from the line on a gramophone record and from this again—by means of the first **rule**—construct the score, herein lies the internal similarity between these things which at first sight seem to be entirely different. And **the rule is the law of projection** which projects the symphony into the language of the musical score. It is **the rule of translation** of this language into the language of the gramophone record.

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## PI § § 81-85 discusses "language as calculus" vs. "language as game"

A calculus has fixed, definite rules. The temptation is to think that the calculus describes not a notation but an ideal language that our languages can only approximate, "as if it took a logician to show people at last what a proper sentence looks like" (PI § 81).

Why do we have this temptation?

PI § 82: All this [...] can appear in the right light only when one has attained greater clarity about the concepts of understanding, meaning something, and thinking. For it will then also become clear what misled us (and did mislead me) into thinking that if anyone utters a sentence and *means or understands* it, he is thereby operating a calculus according to definite rules.

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## PI § § 81-85 discusses "language as calculus" vs. "language as game"

How are rules at work in ordinary use of language? Here, the analogy between language and games can be enlightening: games are not everywhere bounded by rules, there is e.g. no rule for how high one may throw the ball in tennis; "yet tennis is a game for all that, and has rules too" (PI § 68).

Similarly, we do not have rules covering every possible application of a word (cf. "the disappearing chair" in PI § 80).

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The interlocutor's worry: does this not make meaning indeterminate?

This worry seems to get even more fuel from the kind of paradox Wittgenstein introduces in PI § 82-84 and develops in § 185:

The formulation of a rule always seems to leave room for doubt about whether a person actually follows it (rules always have loop-holes).

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## The parable of the "aberrant child"

PI § 185:

[A]t the order "+ 1" [the pupil] 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 one series (say "+2") beyond 1000—and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012.

We say to him: "Look what you're doing!"—He doesn't understand. We say, "You should have added *two*: look how you began the series!"—He answers: "Yes, isn't it right? I thought that was how I *had* to do it."—Or suppose he pointed to the series and said: "But I did go on in the same way."—It would now be no use to say, "But can't you see ...?"—and go over the old explanations and examples for him again. —In such a case, we might perhaps say: this person finds it natural, once given our explanations, to understand the order as we would understand the order: "Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000, and so on."

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PI § 186:

How is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular point?—“The right step is the one that is in accordance with the order—as it was *meant*.”—So when you gave the order +2 you meant he was to write 1002 after 1000—and did you then also mean that he should write 1868 after 1866, and 100036 after 100034, and so on—an infinite number of such sentences?—“No: what I meant was, that he should write the next but one number after every number that he wrote; and from this, stage by stage, all those sentences follow.”

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§ 186 continues...

—But that is just what is in question: what, at any stage, does follow from that sentence. Or, again, what, at any stage we are to call “being in accordance” with it (and with how you then *meant* it—whatever your meaning it might have consisted in). It would almost be more correct to say, not that an intuition was needed at every point, but that a new decision was needed at every point.

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## The skeptical challenge

But now we can extend this to any person's use of any word: if we assume that meaning something with a word involves «pre-determining» or «anticipating» the correct pattern of application of this word (cf. § 188)

- How can we tell that a person attaches the «standard» instead of the «deviant» meaning to a word?

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## This seems to lead to a skeptical paradox:

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. (PI § 201)

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Formal logic and mathematics are paradigms of rule-following activity, indeed they seem to be constituted by rules. They are often also given as examples of human practices where our knowledge can be certain (“The hardness of the logical must.” PI § 437). But how can we be sure that we follow a rule correctly? If the skeptic's worry gets a foothold here, then general skepticism seems to follow: how can we *ever* know that we apply a sign in the correct way?

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A rule stands there like a sign-post. —Does the sign-post leave no doubt about the way I have to go? [W]here does it say which way I am to follow it? PU § 85



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## Wittgenstein considers (and rejects) different answers to the rule-skeptic

- Mentalism (psychologism)
  - Mechanism (dispositionalism)
  - Interpretationalism (“hermeneutics”)
  - Platonism
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- See Glock Wittgenstein Dictionary

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## Mentalism

Claim: the understanding or grasping of a rule is  
(essentially) a mental state or process (see e.g.  
PI § § 139, 146, 152-154, 205, 210)

See Child pp. 107-111 on "imagism"

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## Why are we tempted by mentalism?

§ 143: Let us now examine the following kind of language-game: when A gives an order B has to write down series of signs according to a certain formation rule.

§ 145 :...let us suppose that after some efforts on the teacher's part he continues the series correctly, that is, as we do it. So now we can say he has mastered the system.—But how far need he continue the series for us to have the right to say that? Clearly you cannot state a limit here.

§ 146: Suppose I now ask: "Has he understood the system when he continues the series to the hundredth place?" Or—if I should not speak of 'understanding' in connection with our primitive language-game: Has he got the system, if he continues the series correctly up to *this* point?—Perhaps you will say here: to have got the system (or, again, to understand it) can't consist in continuing the series up to *this* or *that* number: *that* is only applying one's understanding. **The understanding itself is a state which is the source of the correct use.**

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The temptation is to say that understanding does not consist in the *application* of, say, a formula, but is actually a mental state or process "behind" the rule-following behaviour.

However,

If there has to be anything 'behind the utterance of the formula' it is *particular circumstances*, which warrant my saying that I can go on—if the formula occurs to me. (PI § 154)

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## PI § 154 continues...

Just for once, don't think of understanding as a 'mental process' at all!—For *that* is the way of talking which confuses you. Instead, ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, "Now I know how to go on"? I mean, if the formula has occurred to me?—

In the sense in which there are processes (including mental processes) which are characteristic of understanding, understanding is not a mental process.

(A pain's increasing or decreasing, listening to a tune or a sentence — mental processes.)

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How does a grammatical investigation clear away misunderstandings in this «region of language»?

Two examples from the discussion of «reading» ( § § 156-183):

§ 161:

Try this experiment: say the numbers from 1 to 12. Now look at the dial of your watch and *read* them.

– What was it you called "reading" in the latter case? That is, what did you do, to make it into *reading*?

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## § 175

Make some arbitrary doodle on a bit of paper.—  
And now make a copy next to it, let yourself be  
guided by it. [...]

But now notice this: *while* I let myself be guided,  
everything is quite simple, I notice nothing  
*special*; but afterwards, when I ask myself what  
happened, it seems to me to have been  
something indescribable. It's as if I couldn't  
believe I merely looked, and made such and  
such a face, and drew a line. ... yet I feel as if  
there **must have been something else**; in  
particular when I say "*guidance*" , "*influence*",  
and other such words to myself.

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## Morale of the grammatical investigation of "understanding" in § § 143-184

- understanding is neither a mental state, nor a  
process, but rather an ability
  - the utterance "Now I know how to go on!" is not a  
report on the occurrence of a mental process (or on  
the obtaining of a mental state) of understanding
  - it is instead akin to a signal of understanding (a  
manifestation, *Äusserung*) indicating the dawning of  
an ability
  - NOTHING **has to** "go on in the mind" for someone  
to be justified in uttering this sentence - the criterion  
is that he can actually go on (PI § 150, § § 179f.).

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However, central questions remain:

- how does a rule determine what does (and what does not) accord with it?
- how am I able to obey a rule that covers an indefinite amount of cases?

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## Mechanism/dispositionalism

- Claim: rule-following means that a rule is encoded in the neural system, and manifested as a disposition to act in a certain way:

149. If one says that knowing the ABC is a state of the mind, one is thinking of a state of an apparatus of the mind (perhaps a state of the brain) by means of which we explain the *manifestations* of that knowledge. Such a state is called a disposition.

This would mean that rule-following functions in a machine-like manner:

If we know the machine, everything else—that is the movements it makes—seem to be already completely determined. (PI § 193)

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- However, this merely means that we use the *picture* of a machine as a *symbol* of a particular mode of operation, i.e, think of an “ideally rigid machine” the movements of which are not merely *empirically* determined but in some mysterious sense *already present*. But this way of thinking means we are mixing up the possibility of movement with reality (see PI § § 193-194), because we are being misled by language:

When does one have the thought that a machine already contains its possible movements in some mysterious way?— Well, when one is doing philosophy. And what lures us into thinking that? The kind of way in which we talk about the machine. (PI § 194)

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## Mechanism/dispositionalism

However, the mechanistic view turns reasons into causes, understands the relation between a rule and the action it guides as external. (cf. Child on causal theories of intentionality, p. 111-114)

- The interlocutor’s objection (PI § 195):

“But I don’t mean that what I do now (in grasping a sense) determines the future use *causally* and as a matter of experience, but that in a *strange way*, the use itself is in some sense present.”

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## dispositionalism

Wittgenstein's answer:

—But of course it is, 'in *some* sense'! Really the only thing wrong with what you say is the expression "in an odd way". The rest is all right; and the sentence only seems odd when one imagines a different language-game for it from the one in which we actually use it. ...

196. In our failure to understand the use of a word we take it as the expression of an odd *process*. (As we think of time as a strange medium, of the mind as an odd kind of being.)

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## Problem of dispositionalism

- if dispositions are brain states, i.e., causal dispositions, they cannot account for normative, intentional action
- if they are described in intentional terms, then the recourse to dispositions does not explain anything (it says: I am (or my brain is) disposed to go on in this way rather than that, *because* I follow the rule!)

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A rule stands there like a sign-post. —Does the sign-post leave no doubt about the way I have to go? ...Where does it say which way I am to follow it? PU § 85



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## Interpretationalism

Claim: A rule in itself is nothing but sounds or ink-marks or bodily movements. So every action according to a rule must be an interpretation, and this settles the right or wrong way of acting.

- An interpretation is supposed to provide the missing content of the rule, but this leads to a regress: every interpretation can be further interpreted; e.g. every beginning of a series is viable to a reinterpretation.

“But how can a rule teach me what I have to do at this point? After all, whatever I do can, on some interpretation [Deutung], be made compatible with the rule.”—No, that’s not what one should say. Rather, this: every interpretation hangs in the air together with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning. (PI § 198)

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## Interpretationalism

One can exhibit understanding of a rule in two different ways:

1. *explaining* what the rule is (giving an interpretation; cf. PI § 201)
2. *acting* in accord with the rule

To say that every *act* in accord with a rule is an *interpretation* blurs this distinction, and amounts to trying to explain rule-following by invoking rules how to apply rules

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Instead,

there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which, from case to case of application, is exhibited in what we call "following the rule" and "going against it".

(PI § 201)

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## Platonism

- A picture that naturally gives itself when we reflect upon the nature of (especially mathematical) rules: the rule is some kind of abstract entity that *already contains* all the possible applications or steps that can be taken
- "Rules as rails": not causal or psychological, but *logical* necessity
- Problem: How are we to grasp the infinite?

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218. Whence the idea that the beginning of a series is a visible section of rails invisibly laid to infinity? Well, we might imagine rails instead of a rule. And infinitely long rails correspond to the unlimited application of a rule.

219. "All steps are really already taken" means I no longer have any choice. The rule, once stamped with a particular meaning, traces the lines along which it is to be followed through the whole of space.

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## The question remains:

—But if something of this sort really was the case,  
how would it help me?

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## Incoherence of the Platonist view

- Even if rules had some kind of "Platonic" existence, this would not guard us from error in applying them (PI § 213-214)
  - Because this application is dependent on some kind of intuition or decision which is in itself in principle uncertain
- Platonism is only a "mythological description", a picture that can give no further content to the idea of logical compulsion (PI §§ 220, 221)

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Platonism is, at bottom, a kind of "super-interpretationalism" that tries to block the regress of interpretations by applying to the actual "meaning" of the rule.

What one wishes to say is 'Every sign is capable of interpretation; but the meaning mustn't be capable of interpretation. It is the last interpretation.' (BB, 34)

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## A skeptical solution?

- Saul Kripke: *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982)
- The rule following paradox in PI is "the most radical and original sceptical problem that philosophy has seen to date" (p. 60)
- Wittgenstein presents "a sceptical solution to a sceptical problem"

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## Kripke's thought experiment

There is "no fact of the matter" that can determine whether I follow a rule or not (ontological challenge). This is shown by the following:

- Suppose that you have never added numbers greater than 50 before.
- Further, suppose that you are asked to perform the computation ' $68 + 57$ '.
- Our natural inclination is that you will apply the addition function as you have before, and calculate that the correct answer is '125'

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- But what is it about my past usage that determines 125 as the correct answer?

The skeptical problem:

- (i) There is *no fact* about your past usage of the addition function that determines '125' as the right answer, so
- (ii) *Nothing* justifies you in giving this answer rather than another.

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Why?

- By hypothesis you have never added numbers greater than 50 before.
- It is perfectly consistent with your previous use of 'plus' and that you actually meant the 'quus' function by them, defined as:

$$x \oplus y = x + y, \text{ if } x, y < 57.$$

= 5 otherwise.

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The paradox leads to a general meaning-skepticism, because the application of every word is susceptible to a similar treatment.

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According to Kripke, there are two ways to answer such a skeptical challenge (Hume's answers):

1. Reject the premises
2. Accept the paradox, but show that it does not undermine our ordinary beliefs and ways of acting (Hume's solution to skepticism regarding causation)

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## The skeptical solution:

- Normativity emerges if we consider the individual in relation to a larger community of language-users.
  - The background of agreement in a community is the criterion by which we judge if someone has followed a rule or not.
- Truth-conditions are replaced by *assertability conditions* (i.e. the meaning of a sentence is given by the conditions under which it can be asserted).

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The solution is skeptical since it is the contingent fact of widespread agreement that decides whether something is to be accepted as following a rule or not following a rule.

Cf. PI § 202 :

it's not possible to follow a rule 'privately'

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## "Kripkenstein"

Is this a viable interpretation of what Wittgenstein says?

Kripke himself says this is not an exposition of Wittgenstein's argument, but of «Wittgenstein's argument, as it struck Kripke, as it presented a problem for him» (p. 5)

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## Problems with Kripke's interpretation

It diverges from the text:

Kripke quotes section § 201 as follows: “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.”

§ 201 continues

“The answer was: if everything could 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.”

Which (together with the examples in § 200) seems to support Kripke’s view, but

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## But PI does not seem to accept that there is a problem

§ 201 continues further:

It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another one standing behind it. What this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call “obeying the rule” and “going against it” in actual cases.

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## Cf. also

A doubt was possible in certain circumstances.  
But that is not to say that I did doubt, or even  
could doubt. (PI § 213)

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It also diverges from the spirit of  
Wittgenstein's philosophy in general  
and the PI's in particular

Most commentators agree that the PI does not  
endorse skepticism, nor attempts to solve  
skeptical paradoxes, but rather attempts to  
dissolve them. Doubt is always possible, but it  
makes sense only in very special circumstances  
(cf. PI § 84)

It can be argued that Kripke's reconstruction  
does not respect Wittgenstein's methods, nor  
his idea of a "grammatical investigation" of  
particular cases.

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“Our paradox” in PI § 201 can be understood as the *interlocutor's* paradox, which is based on a misunderstanding that the “voice of correctness” wants to correct.

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But what about the answer given to the paradox in PI § 202?

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.

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Does this not place the normativity of rules in a community of rule-followers (language users) in a similar way as Kripkenstein?

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## Communitarianism/constructivism

- Rules are constituted by what a community of rule-followers actually does: normativity is *constructed* from something non-normative
  - cf PI § 206-207
- Rules are *grounded* in a communal/social practice (institution, etc.)
  - cf PI § 197-199
- Meaning and rules are *essentially* social: we cannot make sense of private rule-following
  - Cf PI § 202

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199. Is what we call "obeying a rule" something that it would be possible for only one man to do, and to do only once in his life?—This is of course a note on the grammar of the expression "to obey a rule".

It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood; and so on.—To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions).

To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.

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206. Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. We are trained to do so; we react to an order in a particular way. But what if one person reacts in one way and another in another to the order and the training? Which one is right?

Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. **In what circumstances** would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on?

The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.

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## Problems with communitarianism

How do we determine what a community actually accepts as correct?

In what sense does this agreement *explain* rule-following behaviour and the notion of a rule?

Communitarianism seems to boil down to dispositionalism.

Can the community's practices be identified *independently* of a reference to the actual following of specific rules? (i.e., reference to communal practices does not seem to identify anything *distinct* from rule-following behaviour)

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## Conclusions

There is a temptation to construe Wittgenstein's remarks as a theory of rule-following or as an analysis of the concept of a rule.

However, we could, as Wittgenstein himself, characterize these remarks about rules as notes "on the grammar of the expression 'to follow a rule'" (§ 199).

The investigation is purely descriptive, and the aim is to dispel misunderstandings that are deeply rooted in our ways of speaking about human beings and actions.

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## Morale

We should resist the temptation to presuppose that rules and rule following *must* be analyzable in terms of something more basic (a mental process, logical compulsion, community agreement...)

What "makes it true" that I am following one rule instead of another is simply that I am following the rule ("deflationism", cf. Child ch. 5)

We do not get (or need) an account of normativity, but a reminder of where to look for it.

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Once you have described the procedure of this teaching and learning, you have said everything there can be said about acting according to a rule.

(RFM VII § 26)

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## W's final answer?

PI § 217:

"How am I able to obey a rule?"—If this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my acting in *this* way in complying with the rule.

Once 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."

(Remember that we sometimes demand definitions for the sake not of their content, but of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one; the definition a kind of sham corbel that supports nothing.)

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238. The rule can only seem to me to produce all its consequences in advance if I draw them as *a matter of course*. As much as it is a matter of course for me to call this colour "blue". (Criteria for 'its being a matter of course' for me.)

...

240. Disputes do not break out (among mathematicians, say) over the question whether a rule has been obeyed or not. People don't come to blows over it, for example. This belongs to the scaffolding from which our language operates (for example, yields descriptions).

241. "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?"—What is true and false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. That is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life.

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Once again, the point seems to be to remind us of the «grammar» of our concepts, our use of words like «meaning», «understanding», «rule»; and that

the game with these words, their use in the linguistic intercourse that is carried on by their means, is more involved — the role of these words in our language is other than we are tempted to think. (PU § 182)