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Rule-following: conclusions

The "private language argument"

Structure 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"
§ § 316-362 Thought
§ § 363-397 Imagination
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Rules and rule-skepticism

The philosophical temptation is to seek for informative answers to questions like:

"What is a rule?"

"What counts as following a rule?"

"What is it to grasp a rule?"

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

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

- Mentalism (psychologism)
- Mechanism (dispositionalism)
- Interpretationalism
- Platonism

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§ 201

…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.

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.

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)

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)

- When we actually "look and see" what is involved, we notice that nothing out of the ordinary is supposed; characteristic regularities and patterns constitute the rule-following
- There can be no guarantee against "aberrant" cases; but mostly there is no such problem of disagreement
- We do not get (or need) an account of normativity, but a reminder of where to look for it

Emphasis is on our *lives* with rules

In fact, of course, we are not just trained to go "446, 448, 450", etc. and other similar things; we are brought into a life in which we rest on, depend on, people's following rules of many sorts, and in which people depend on us: rules, and agreement in following them, and reliance on agreement in following them, and criticizing or rounding on people who do not do it right – all this is woven into the texture of life; and it is in the context of its having a place in such a form of human life that a "mistake" is recognizably that. (Diamond 1989, 27–8)

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 ornamental coping that supports nothing.)

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.

Results

- Dissolution of ontological quandary: what we call a rule is connected to regularity in actions. It can have many different roles in our language-games (cf. PI § 54, 82-83)
- Dissolution of epistemic quandary: what makes it true that I am following rule A instead of rule B is simply my following rule A.
- Dissolution of the normative quandary: what makes rule A into a norm for my conduct is simply that I follow the rule A, "as a matter of course", and can use it as a justification for my going on in a particular way

Cf. PI § 197

[Is it] that all the rules [of chess] are contained in my act of intending [to play chess]? […] And if that is nonsense – what kind of super-rigid connection obtains between the act of intending and the thing intended?—Where is the connection effected between the sense of the words "Let's play a game of chess" and all the rules of the game?—Well, in the list of rules of the game, in the teaching of it, in the day-to-day practice of playing.

W's account is

- anti-reductionist (does not attempt to explain rule-following in terms of something else)
- anti-systematic (it is not a general account or systematic theory about rule-following)
- contextual (what a rule is and how it functions is determined by the context, the complex surroundings, in which it occurs)
- "deflationist"?
  - Cf. Child, ch. 5

The notion of "grammar"

In the PI a philosophical investigation is described as a "grammatical" investigation

E.g. PI § 90:

Our investigation is [...] a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language

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What does this grammatical investigation achieve?

McGinn: "The philosophical significance of Wittgenstein's remarks does not lie in these 'conclusions' [like "meaning is use", "speaking a language is a practice", etc.], which are on their own thin and obscure, and which are clearly not intended to serve as the basis for the construction of a more elaborate theoretical machinery. The real purpose of the journey that has been made lies, on the one hand, in the **overcoming of certain deep-seated philosophical myths and inclinations**, and on the other, in **the reorientation of our style of thought towards** what lies open to view in our practice of using language."

Baker

Wittgenstein thought that all of [his] observations are uncontroversial descriptions of familiar aspects of our practice of explaining and using the expressions 'a rule' and 'to follow a rule'. Together they were meant to give an *Übersicht* (overview) of what it is to follow a rule. To the extent that this attempt succeeds, it is an achievement as positive as the construction of any theory of rule following. By eliminating the illusion that anything stands in need of theoretical explanation, it pre-empts the place occupied by any possible theory of rule-following.

(pp. 57–8)

Quietism?

"Wittgenstein's quietism is not a refusal to engage in substantive philosophy in the face of what everyone has to accept as genuine problems. It is an activity of diagnosing, so as to explain away, some appearances that we are confronted with genuine problems. The supposed problems disappear, leaving no need for theory construction to make things 'less mysterious.'"

(McDowell 2009, 371)

Not everybody thinks Wittgenstein succeeds…

- "Wittgenstein generally writes with a transcendental pomposity that makes parody seem superfluous, not to say impossible". (Fodor 2006, 7)

Issues of reception

Should we care about Wittgenstein's own view of philosophy and its proper *Darstellungsform*?

If not, what is worth while in the PI?
- Unsystematic remarks that can be developed into theories?
- Interesting problem formulations?

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If yes, is he successful in realizing this view?

- Is the PI really philosophy with only "trivial" theses?
- Are problems or puzzles only dissolved, or does Wittgenstein present alternative views to those criticized?
- Is the peculiar form of the PI internal to its message or does it have other explanations?

If we think the PI succeeds:
- Can Wittgenstein's methods be emulated?
  - How substantial is his notion of "grammar"?
- What is left of philosophy?
  - Does philosophy become a kind of therapy?

The "private language argument"

- Is there such an argument?
  - Wittgenstein himself never employs the phrase 'private language argument'
  - Where can we find the argument and what is its relation to other themes in the PI (esp. the rule-following considerations)?
- What is it supposed to establish?

Structure

- § § 243-255: introduction of the problem
- § § 256-271: presentation of the private language scenario ("the private diarist")
- § § 272-315: consequences regading the "inner/outer" distinction ("the beetle in the box")

Two interpretations

1. The orthodox (substantial) interpretation:
   Wittgenstein presents an argument against the possibility of private language and either succeeds (Rhees, Malcolm, Kenny) or does not succeed (Ayer, Strawson, Thomson)

The section on private language is considered free-standing or self-contained (ie can be read without caring about the rest of the PI)

Majority of work on Wittgenstein on private language consists of critical responses to a number of canonical interpreters' readings of a small number of key passages

Presuppositions of orthodox reading

1. The argument begins with with premises about the nature of a private language
2. It leads to the coclusion that such a language is impossible
3. The conclusion has far-reaching implications for philosophy as a whole
4. The argument, while not fully stated in the PI, is a deductive *reductio ad absurdum*

Problem with orthodox interpretation: the discussion is often carried on independently of Ws text

Not enough attention is paid to the question of whether or not the "arguments" presented can be identified with the views of the author of the PI (eg in §258 and §293)

Orthodox reading

- Wittgenstein's aim is to provide an argument to the end that a specific conception of private language leads to a contradiction
  - the interpretive question is to reconstruct that argument, and to assess whether he succeeds or fails

Reading strategies

«Each generation of readers has discovered a Wittgenstein who seems to have anticipated their own philosophical concerns with remarkable far-sightedness. … Instead of reading our own preconceptions into the gaps we find in Wittgenstein's telling of the story, we might reread the passage in question with an eye to detail, and look to the broader context [the PI as a whole, as well as W's other writings on private language] for further clarification.» (Stern 2011, 11)

Two interpretations

2. The unorthodox ("Pyrrhonian", "resolute") interpretation:

the idea of a private language «implodes from within»; it cannot be coherently formed:

"We cannot really imagine this, or rather […] there is nothing of the sort to imagine, or rather […] when we as it were try to imagine this we imagine something else than we think." (Cavell 1979, 344)

Unorthodox reading

- We must pay attention to the polyphonic structure of the passages in question (what is the narratorial position?)
- We do not get an argument against the possibilty of private language. Rather, we see several attempts and an ultimate failure to give sense to the interlocutor's attempts at formulating the notion of a private language

Structure

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Kripke 1982

"the impossibility of private language emerges as a corollary of [Wittgenstein's] sceptical solution of his own paradox" (68), because the conditions for that solution involve reference to a community and so are "inapplicable to a single person considered in isolation […] the sections following §243—the sections usually called the 'private language argument'—deal with the application of the general conclusions about language drawn in §§138–242 to the problem of sensations." (79)

What is a "private language"?

A "private language" here is *not*:
- A private code
- A language used by a person only in soliloquy
- A (natural or invented) language spoken only by one person

What is a "private language"?

Instead,

The words of this language are to refer to what only to the speaker can know; to his immediate, private, sensations [*Empfindungen*]. So another cannot understand the language. (PI §243)

Why does W introduce the discussion here?

In fact, the theme is hinted at already in §1 (in Ws translation).

It is connected to questions running through the PI: the question of meaning and reference, understanding

«Natural, smooth sequence»? So there is some kind of progression form rule-following considerations to the pla

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What is a "private language"?

- It is a language referring to my sensations (Empfindungen)
- Sensations are intimately connected with one's body
- Philosophers often contrast sensations with perceptions of the external world, claiming that they provide one with awareness of nothing independent of them
- Alternatively sensations are taken to be a perception of the state and properties of one's body

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What is a "private language"?

- The assumption about the privacy of sensations is coupled with the idea that sensations are (a strange kind of) objects, and all words are names (that the meaning of words is given by what they stand for or refer to)
  - The "Augustinian picture" of language

- As a result we can think of a language naming sensations that is unsharable and unteachable in *principle*, since its words are supposed to refer to immediate private experiences known *only* to the speaker

What is a "private language"?

"Privacy" here is epistemic or metaphysical privacy:

- Only **I** can know I have this sensation, and know what it is like to have it
- Only **I** can be certain that this sensation exists
  - Cf. the notion of qualia

Who holds such a view?

- Wittgenstein is not arguing against any named philosophers here. Instead, he is addressing a temptation that is inherent in our ways of speaking about sensations, that can be developed into a full-blown philosophical theory about the mind and its contents. (cf. Augustine in PU §1)

PU §115. A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

PI §254

…. What we 'are tempted to say' in such a case is, of course, not philosophy; but it is its raw material. So, for example, what a mathematician is inclined to say about the objectivity and reality of mathematical facts, is not a philosophy of mathematics, but something for philosophical *treatment*.

255. The philosopher treats a question; like an illness.

Several philosophers have developed theories that build upon an assumption about an essentially private language, e.g.

- Descartes
- Locke
- Russell
- Wittgenstein (ca. 1929-1930)

The Cartesian picture

Mind or soul is a thinking substance, *res cogitas.*

Also sensations like pain belong to *cogitatio.*

I may always be wrong in my judgments about the external world, but the fact that I have a particular sensation at a particular time is indubitable.

The Cartesian picture

My mental life in general is something that I have private and infallible access to, disregarding even the very existence of myself as a bodily creature.

The Cartesian picture

Results:

Priority of the private (first person) over the public (second or third person)

The "inner" is more certain than the "outer"

The language used by *res cogitas* must be private, since it cannot rely on anything "outer"

Problems: seems inevitably to lead to a skepticism about other minds and even solipsism

The empiricistic theory of language

Locke:

- words represent speakers' translation of their internal mental vocabularies (ideas) into sounds, and are meaningful if the hearers can re-translate them into their own internal vocabularies
  - words stand for "nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them" (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* III.ii.2)

The empiricistic theory of language

- The possiblity of communication rests upon the (contingent) fact that we associate our words with more or less the same ideas
- But this association is basically private
  - For all I know, you might have the sensation of "green" but associate it with what I call "red" (i.e., you have the qualia *I* have when confronted with this colour)

Russell

- Knowledge by acquaintace/knowledge by description
- Direct acquaintance is immediate knowledge of eg. sense-data or sensations (ie mental objects)
- It forms the bedrock for all of our other knowledge
- Upshot: my experience is directly known to me, but can only be known to others by description ("Bismarck")

Wittgenstein ca. 1929-1930

Each person's sensation words have two meanings:

- A private, purely introspective meaning (that has a privileged status)
- A public meaning (associated with behaviour)
- See PR 88-89

(Child p.149-150)

The temptation

PI § 243.

A human being can encourage himself, give himself orders, obey, blame and punish himself; he can ask himself a question and answer it. We could even imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue; who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves.

...

§ 243 continues…

But could we also imagine a language in which a person could write down or give vocal expression to his inner experiences—his feelings, moods, and the rest—for his private use?

—Well, can't we do so in our ordinary language?

—But that is not what I mean. The individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language.

The dialogue continues….

244. How do words *refer* to sensations?—There doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about sensations every day, and give them names?

But how is the connexion between the name and the thing named set up? This question is the same as: how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations?—of the word "pain" for example. Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.

The dialogue continues….

"So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?"—On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it.

"Privacy" cannot have to do with privileged knowledge

246. In what sense are my sensations *private*?—Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it.—In one way this is false, and in another nonsense. If we are using the word "know" as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know if I'm in pain.—Yes, but all the same, not with the certainty with which I know it myself!—It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean—except perhaps that I *am* in pain?