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FIL 217/317

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Rule-following: conclusions

The “private language argument”:
introduction

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Important deadlines

- Mandatory mid-term test (breddetest) will be published on MittUiB
Friday 06.10.2023 at 12:00, and closes on **Friday 13.10.2023 at 14:00.**
- Assignment paper: deadline for submission **17.11.2023, 13:00.**

NB you must contact us for approval of the topic of the paper asap!

FIL317: remember **mandatory** supervision on draft!

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Exegetical issues

- The PI consists largely of a dialog between two or more "voices" or rather a polyphony of several different voices
- Can one of the voices be identified with Wittgenstein?
- Does Wittgenstein present theses or theories (about language, meaning, understanding, rules and rule-following, the impossibility of a private language, etc.)?

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Brian McGuinness (2006) on Wittgenstein's philosophical aims and the form of publication of his results:

"If the aim was to clarify by reminding the interlocutor of the obvious when that had been forgotten in the heat of the chase, then the dialogue form and a certain amount of recreating confusion in order to dispel it would be appropriate. The *Tractatus* agrees in its general aim, though it's not in dialogue form but is a parody of a mathematical treatise, and so is itself fundamentally misleading." (p. 379)

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Structure of the PI

- I. § § 1-133: Philosophy of language and its methods, in opposition to the philosophy of language and methods of the Tractatus
 - Acting, Language game, Form of life, Family resemblance, The nature and role of logic, The nature and role of philosophy ...
- II. § § 134-693: Applications of the insights and tools from § § 1-133 to ...
 - Understanding, rules, rule-following, pain, privacy, the mental, imagination, the will, intention ...

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We will concentrate on

§ § 134-242 The rule-following considerations

§ § 243-315 "The private language argument"

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Rules and rule-following, summing up

The philosopher tends to ask questions like:
«How do we get from the rule to rule-following? How do I make the transition from the rule to its application? Which is the mediating step between the two? What is to count as following the rule correctly?»

These questions get special importance and urgency if we think that language and meaning is somehow rule-bound

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Proposed answers

- Mechanism (determinism)
- Platonism
- Mentalism
- Interpretationalism
- Decisionism

Since all of these fail, we seem to end up with skepticism about rules (and meaning)

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Skepticism

Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982)

PI § 201: 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.

- The formulation of a rule seems always to permit a way of following it that one didn't foresee, and seems *always* to leave room for doubt about whether a person actually follows the rule (rules have loop-holes). How can under such circumstances rule-following and (stable) meaning ever come about?

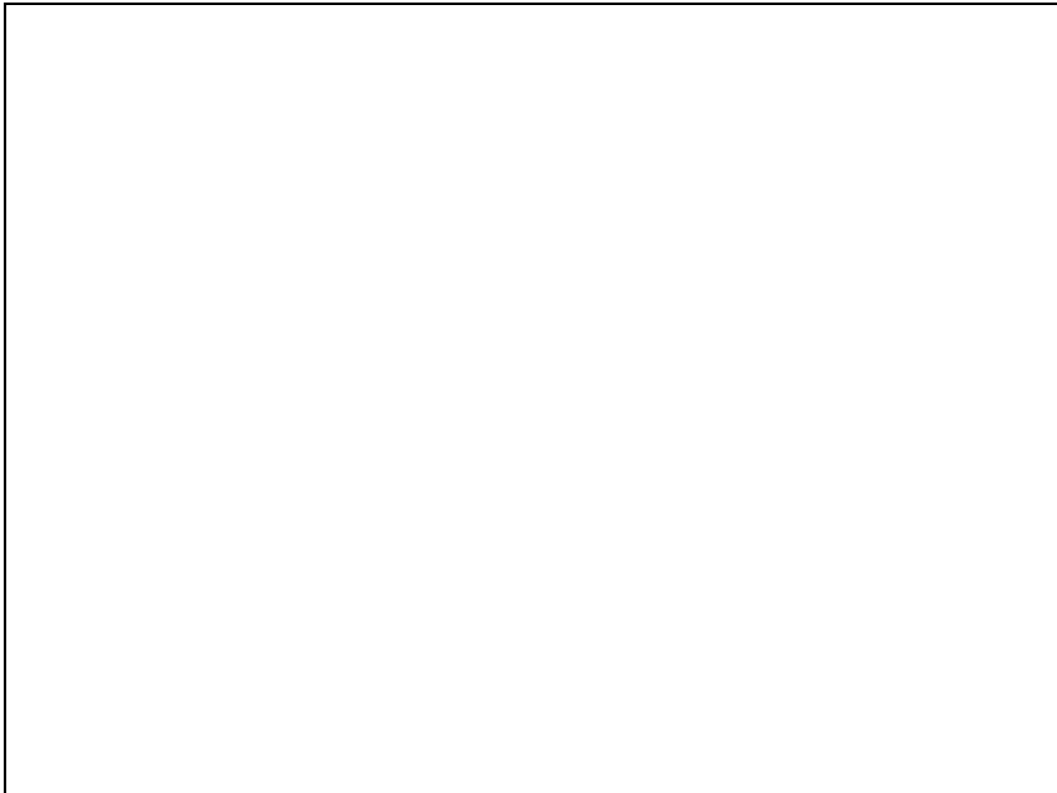
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A skeptical solution?

Kripke: 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"
- There is "no fact of the matter" that can determine whether I follow a rule or not

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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, and an explanation of what can or cannot ground rule-following.

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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No skeptical problem?

“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.

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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A's summary

NB: Wittgenstein's investigations into the grammar of 'rule' and 'rule-following' are intended as investigations of their grammar – not as investigations of the phenomena of 'rule' and 'rule-following'. (cf. PI §)

- Each of the positions above (Determinism, Platonism, Interpretationalism and Mentalism, Decisionism, Skepticism) gets something right. As general positions, however, they are wrong – they seem forgetful about the fact that 'rule' and 'rule-following' are family resemblance concepts.

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A's summary

The grammatical investigation of the concept of rule-following tells us that it is learned and practiced in specific language games – which gives it order and support (vs. idea of total lack of link between rule and application of the rule).

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A's summary

- It also tells us that learning to follow a rule does not pre-determine and pre-contain all upcoming cases of rule-following (vs. deterministic and Platonistic ideas of “rules as rails”).
- The concept tells us further that rule-following is to be treated as a matter of practices rather than of cognition and volition (vs. Mentalism, Interpretationalism, Decisionism).

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(Later) Wittgenstein wants to connect “rule” and “rule-following”, as he wants to do with all concepts constituting philosophical problems, with *action* and *practice*, rather than treating them in traditional epistemological and ontological terms.

He wants to *describe* rather than *explain*.

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- the idea of "language games" highlights how words and rules function within specific social and practical contexts.
- language is not a fixed set of meanings or rules; rather, it can be described in terms of various language games, each with its own rules and purposes.
- These language games are played by individuals as they communicate and engage in various activities.

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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)
- anti-essentialist ("rule" and "rule-following" as family resemblance concepts)
- 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

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Deflationism?

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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Morale

We should resist the temptation to presuppose that rules and rule following *must* be analyzable in terms of something more basic or essential (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")

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Deflationism

Deflationism about rules means that there are not both the use of the term and in addition a rule or principle (or mechanism or process) governing the use: there is **only** the use.

- The connection between a rule and its application lies in the practice of using it. It does not depend on any "facts about me".
- There can be no guarantee against "aberrant" cases; but mostly there is no such problem of disagreement.

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Agreement in form of life

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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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."

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“Quietism”

Quietism in the Christian tradition means a movement holds that perfection consists in passivity (quiet) of the soul, in the suppression of human effort and will, and emphasizes contemplation and inactivity.

The term was appropriated to (pejoratively) denote the later Wittgenstein’s methodological outlook on philosophical practice as a kind of avoidance or rejection of philosophy (see e.g. C. Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, 1992)

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Quietism as a positive characteristic

"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)

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From rules to private language

- In the preface of the PI Wittgenstein says that he had thought it was essential that “in the book the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural, smooth, sequence”.
- But he says he did not achieve this – instead, “the same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions”

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- But we can perhaps still find some kind of progression from the rule-following considerations to what follows, i.e. the “private language argument”?
- For instance concerning the question of “following a rule privately”?

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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?

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Structure

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

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Problematic starting-points

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

A 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.

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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)

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Presuppositions of orthodox reading

1. The argument begins with premises about the nature of a private language
2. It leads to the conclusion 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*

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Problem with orthodox interpretation: the discussion is often carried on independently of W's 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)

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258. Let us imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign "S" and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation.—I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated.—But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition.—How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation—and so, as it were, point to it inwardly []

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293 [...]—Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a "beetle". No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle.—Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.—But suppose the word "beetle" had a use in these people's language?—If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. [...]

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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

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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)

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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)

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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 possibility 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
- Cavell, Goldfarb, Mulhall, Stern, ...

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Background of the PLA

Wittgenstein thinks our sensation-language is in “order as it is”. However, when start philosophizing about our mind, and our use of sensation-words, many aspects of this use appear as problematic from a semantic, epistemic, and metaphysical point of view.

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Peculiarities of our use of sensation-words

There is an asymmetry between the first person and the (second- or) third person regarding this use, which seems to be grounded in our access to the “inner life” of persons:

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- 1) There seems to be an absence of doubt about my own experience, but an uncertainty about the experiences of others
- 2) My subjective experience often seems to be partly or wholly ineffable
- 3) I seem to have immediate knowledge of my own experience and only inferential knowledge of the experience of others

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Wittgenstein and «private language»

Why does W introduce the discussion here?

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

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

There are connections between the rule-following considerations to the pla, for instance the question of "following a rule privately".

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