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FIL 217/317

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Rule-following: conclusions

The “private language argument”:  
introduction

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How does the rule guide me?

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?»

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## Important deadlines

- Mandatory mid-term test (breddetest) will be published tomorrow Friday 07.10.2022 at 12:00, deadline 14.10.2022 at 14:00
- Assignment paper deadline for submission 21.11.2022, 13:00. NB you must contact us for approval of the topic of the paper asap!

Length of final paper:

3000-5000 words FIL217

4000-6000 words FIL317

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## Proposed answers

- Mechanism (determinism)
- Platonism
- Mentalism
- Interpretationalism

Since all of these fail, we seem to end up with skepticism about rules

There seems to be warrant for this in W's text

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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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## 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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## 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 *a/ways* 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"

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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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## 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 community 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 Wittgenstein?

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)

Disregarding this it is very common to discuss the rule-following problematic with reference to Kripke's reading. He is a central inspiration for the "communitarian" interpretation of rule-following

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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 or intersubjective: we cannot make sense of private rule-following
  - Cf PI § 202

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## Communitarianism

As a consequence, language is essentially a set of social practices (language games) grounded in a shared form of life. It is this background that constitutes the assertability conditions of sentences.

In order to understand how language works, we must attend to the uses to which its sentences are put and the circumstances in which they are used.

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Again, many things W says about rules and rule-following seem to support such an interpretation.

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## Practice

The answer given to the paradox in PI § 202:  
[...] 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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## Customs, institutions, uses

198 [...] a person goes by a sign-post only insofar as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom.

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).**

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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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## 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”, cf. Child ch. 5)

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

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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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## 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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## 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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The (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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## However, the discussion goes on:

- Does a practice need to be communal – or can it be individual?
- Does following a rule depend on there being a community following this rule, or is it sufficient that I alone follow the rule?

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- In the preface of the PI Wittgenstein says that it was essential for him that “in the book the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural, smooth, sequence”.
- So we can look for some kind of progression from 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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## 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

«Natural, smooth sequence of thoughts»? So there is some kind of progression from rule-following considerations to the pla? For instance the question of “following a rule privately”.

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

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## What is a "private language"?

So 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

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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 peculiar 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

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## What is a "private language"?

"Privacy" here is epistemic or metaphysical privacy ("privileged access"):

- 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

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## 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)

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«Privacy» rests on a picture rather  
than a theory of the mind

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.

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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.

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

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

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## 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 (or thought) at a particular moment is indubitable.

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## 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. Sensations imply awareness of nothing independent of themselves.

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## 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 cogitans* must be private, since it cannot rely on anything "outer"

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

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## The Cartesian picture

The flip-side of Cartesian dualism is  
behaviourism:

The only way to give sense to our sensation-  
words is through outer criteria, i.e. to understand  
them as referring to observable behaviour only