

## Limits or Limitations?

### On a Bifurcation in Reading Wittgenstein's

#### *Philosophical Investigations* §§185–201

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#### Abstract

In *Philosophical Investigations* §§185–201, Wittgenstein addresses an oscillation in our thinking about the nature of rules. He seems to introduce a problem—*how do we follow rules?*—, and a “paradox” in which it is rooted, in order to find a solution to them; only to then call the whole puzzle a “misunderstanding” after all. My contention is that this apparent friction can best be understood and resolved when we view it in light of Wittgenstein’s engagement with limits and limitations, and how easy it is to confuse one with the other when thinking about human thought and language. This central bit of the frequently discussed “rule-following considerations,” then, is concerned not simply with matters of semantics, convention, or community, but rather with the question of a proper philosophical method for thinking about our life with language in general. When traced out, these few remarks elucidate a bifurcation in interpreting one of the central methodological themes in Wittgenstein.

### 1. Introduction

*Philosophical Investigations* §§185–201 address an oscillation in our thinking about the nature of rules. Wittgenstein first describes teaching a mathematical rule (expressed by the order “+2”) to a pupil who develops a peculiar practice (adding 2 until reaching 1000, then adding 4). There is tension between the two points structuring the ensuing line of thought. First Wittgenstein writes:

In such a case, we might perhaps say: this person finds it natural, once given our explanations, to understand our order as *we* would understand the order ‘Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000, and so on’. (PI 2009: 185)

This gives rise to a series of questions and puzzles which have been called (part of) “the rule-following paradox” (e.g. Kripke 1982: 8). However, their result is perhaps surprising:

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule. [...] That there is a misunderstanding here is shown by the mere fact that in this chain of reasoning we place one interpretation behind another, as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another lying behind it. For what we thereby show is that 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 2009: 201)

Why does Wittgenstein seemingly introduce a problem and devote a series of sections to it, only to arrive at the result that seeing it as such is a misunderstanding? This question should give us pause, as it radically recasts what has been taken as a straightforward problem about semantics and its relation to convention and community in recent decades of Wittgenstein scholarship on

the “rule-following considerations.” It raises a striking, and arguably more fundamental, Wittgensteinian issue which Stephen Mulhall describes as follows: “it is fatally easy to interpret limits as limitations, to experience conditions as constraints” (Mulhall 2005: 94). Whether one takes Wittgenstein to be concerned with the former or the latter constitutes a bifurcation in reading these sections, and in understanding his overall ambition.

## 2. Meaning, Anticipation, Predetermination (§§185–192)

Wittgenstein initially contrasts the unusual pupil with the teacher. It appears as if in her (or any competent speaker’s) “*meaning the order*” (or any utterance), her “mind [...] flew ahead and took all the steps before [she] physically arrived” (PI 2009: 188). We may feel that in following a rule, “[t]he steps are *really* already taken, even before [we] take them in writing or in speech or in thought” (PI 2009: 188). Otherwise things seem left up to fancy—how, then, would a rule properly guide our going on?

Conversely it seems clear enough that in understanding a rule, we do not explicitly grasp each instance of it (see PI 2009: 186–7). Wittgenstein even appears to suggest a libertarian view, saying “[i]t would almost be more correct to say [...] that a new decision was needed at every point” (PI 2009: 186). This seems strange alongside his sensitivity for the pull behind the picture of an always-already completed sequence. Where would there be room for a decision here?

It turns out, however, that both ideas—call them *rule determinism* and *rule libertarianism*—are instances of one picture: that of a constitutively mysterious mechanism ‘within us’ or ‘in our minds’ that springs into action in rule-following. “[I]t seemed as if [...] a rule’s steps] were in some *unique* way predetermined, anticipated – in the way that only meaning something could anticipate reality.” (PI 2009: 188) The libertarian act of deciding each step *is* their entire predetermination—for if the mechanism within us is inherently elusive to understanding, its ‘decisions’ are hardly decisions *of ours*. They’re much the same thing as predeterminations outside our ken and control.

We might see this picture as one of the *mind-internality* of rules, and Wittgenstein as favoring an ‘externalist’ picture. One such reading deems him a conventionalist (e.g. Dummett 1978: 170–1): the normativity of linguistic rules lies, not (mysteriously) ‘within us’, but (plainly) ‘without us’—in their *use*, their conventional application in a community. However:

Your ‘I already knew at the time...’ amounts to something like: ‘If I had then been asked what number he should write after 1000, I would have replied ‘1002.’ And that I don’t doubt. This is an assumption of much the same sort as ‘If he had fallen into the water then, I would have jumped in after him’. (PI 2009: 187)

Wittgenstein doesn't doubt we can act *spontaneously* in light of rules—that our acts can be *without premeditation* and *authored by us*: we know, and act upon that knowledge, of our own accord when encountering a case that falls under a rule we have mastered.

The first recourse Wittgenstein makes to something approximating convention—the “way we always use [a sign]”—tellingly reacts to a linguistic confusion: we should consult everyday practices when we don't know our way about, e.g. when someone “uses a sign unknown to us” (PI 2009: 190). This indicates a casuistic, not a general principle. Indeed, it seems we *can* “grasp the whole use of a word at a stroke”—or express our understanding that way (see PI 2009: 191, 197). Yet this capacity is puzzling: thinking about it, we can be “seduced” (PI 2009: 192) by what Wittgenstein calls “the crossing of different pictures” (PI 2009: 191).

### 3. Interlude: Minds and Machines (§§193–196)

These “different pictures” cannot be determinism and libertarianism, which are facets of *one* picture—that of the ‘internality’ of rules. Wittgenstein now considers the background idea bringing about the “crossing”: *viewing mindedness like machinery*. This theme is evident in the internalist picture: a machine “seems already to contain its own mode of operation” such that “the movements it will make [...] seem to be already completely determined” (PI 2009: 193). This notion of machinery is complicated by unexamined metaphysical implications (see PI 2009: 194–5). But the analogy is symptomatic of a pernicious prejudice about the mind: Wittgenstein's insistence that we often imagine our mental life as “an odd *process*” (PI 2009: 196) corresponds to his general concern with the tempting picture of the mind as a strange “mechanism” or “apparatus” (see e.g. PI 2009: 149, 170, 270, 317).

But a mechanical apparatus—a machine—is crucially different from human mindedness: most importantly, the mind is autonomous *precisely in that it can go astray*. We can misunderstand, misapply a rule, etc. We are *finite* thinkers and speakers and thus bound to err occasionally. But this openness to error also constitutes our freedom—our capacity to truly *act* on a given rule in an open-ended way. A machine lacks this openness: it does not operate in light of a rule. Its operation is merely a passive carrying-out of a predetermined process, except when it breaks—in which case it *stops* operating. Here, machinery is no apt analogue, but the opposite of mindedness.

‘Internalism’ is thus revealed as a vision of something machine-like and *inhuman* within us—something wholly other to explain what is most integral and familiar to our existence as speakers. It belongs to the master theme Cavell finds in Wittgenstein: the all-too-human wish to deny the human (see Cavell 1979: 109). We might think that something ‘without us’ holds the cure for this vision, but this new opposition between ‘within’ and ‘without’ is actually the fateful “crossing of different pictures”.

#### 4. Understanding from Within (§§197–201)

I now want to examine the following parts of §197:

- (D) ‘It’s as if we could grasp the whole use of a word at a stroke.’ – Well, that is just what we say we do. [...] But there is nothing astonishing, nothing strange, about what happens. It becomes strange when we are led to think that the future development must in some way already be present in the act of grasping the use and yet isn’t present.
- (1) For we say that there isn’t any doubt that we understand the word, and on the other hand that its meaning lies in its use. [...]
- (2) 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 everyday practice of playing. (PI 2009: 197)

(D) is Wittgenstein’s *diagnosis*: we can get a sense of strangeness about something usually quite unremarkable—our grasping a word at a stroke. §185 and §195 suggest we can be puzzled similarly about sentences and mathematical rules. We are tempted to say “that the future development must [...] be present [...] and yet isn’t present”. This hovering between two opposites expresses a confusion. We want to have *all meaning* present, but fear the inhuman ‘internalist’ consequences. So we search for a way to say it *isn’t* present, and we oscillate.

(1) is an *elucidation* of this oscillation—which is striking: interpreters who ascribe a ‘use theory of meaning’ to Wittgenstein, must find it awkward to see its motto, “meaning lies in [...] use”, used to elucidate an oscillatory confusion. “[I]here isn’t any doubt that we understand the word”, grasp its “whole use” within one act, yet we also want to say that its meaning *just is* its use and thus ‘without us’—in our “*customs* (usages, institutions)” (PI 2009: 199).

This indicates that readings which claim that our understanding depends on guidance from an ‘outward’ shared linguistic practice are motivated by a false pair of opposites. According to them, our choice is between either a *machine-like internalist* or a *conventionalist externalist* conception of rules. They refer to passages like (2)’s insistence on “list[s]”, “teaching[s]”, and “everyday practice” (see also PI 2009: 198–9).

Note, however, how Wittgenstein employs this customary knowledge: he insists that a community “unacquainted with games” could go through the motions of a chess game, “even with all the mental accompaniments”.

[I]f *we* were to see it, we’d say that they were playing chess. But now imagine a game of chess translated according to certain rules into a series of actions which we do not ordinarily associate with a *game* – say into yells and stamping of feet [...]. Would we still be inclined to say that they were playing a game? (PI 2009: 200)

Conventions, in externalism, aren’t simply ‘external’ to some naïve picture of mind-internality. They are external to our very acts of speech and thought, because these acts are seen as inherently deficient. But as §200 shows, the purpose of conventions and community is not to

guide our understanding externally, but to reorient it *from within*—in a sense that is quite different from internalism (see Stroud 2018: 244)—whenever we feel we reach its limits: confronted with a practice that uncannily seems both familiar and strange, viz. divergent human rules and customs, we can reach within our own customs to see how far the analogies go, and where they give out. We might encounter something unknown to us, but even then “[s]hared human behavior is the system of reference” (PI 2009: 206). This new sense of ‘within’ concerns the overall living, rule-governed structure we inhabit as speakers; what Wittgenstein calls “form of life” (PI 2009: 19, 23, 241). His apparent conventionalism in (2) is thus rather a call for *understanding from within*.

This internality leaves no room for externality as an alien guiding force. We might abandon rules for new ones. But in doing so, we remain engaged in language: it is impossible to attain a “view from sideways on” (McDowell 1998: 214) upon that engagement. The point is to not mistake this *limit* to our understanding for a *limitation*. It’s not that we are precluded from doing something—it’s that this purported thing to be done is wholly impossible and thus no thing to be done at all. Reaching the limit of what we do here means reaching the very conditions for doing it. Wanting to go further, towards a view ‘from without’, is thus comparable to Kant’s dove thinking it would fly even better in airless space (see Kant 1998: 129).

I have argued that Wittgenstein treats two confused sets of opposites: rule determinism versus rule libertarianism, which are actually facets of one ‘(mind) internalist’ picture, and that ‘internalism’ versus ‘(conventionalist) externalism’. They all take our ways of thinking and speaking—our life with rule-governed language—to stand in need of something above and beyond: a ‘strange mechanism’, our ‘customs’, or the ‘community’. But this destroys any possibility of recognizing our moves within language as genuine *acts* of our own accord. That they are just that is Wittgenstein’s conclusion: the “misunderstanding” behind the “paradox” is “shown” by our having “a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an interpretation” (PI 2009: 201). In understanding there is no need for super-understanding. And when a pupil *mis*understands a rule, they don’t interpret it peculiarly—they simply don’t understand.

Internalists and externalists see Wittgenstein’s remarks that “[e]xplanations come to an end” (PI 2009: 1), and that we sometimes “have exhausted the justifications, [...] have reached bedrock”, and are “inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do’” (PI 2009: 217), as defeatist or quietist declarations of a limitation. I have argued that a careful look reveals them to rather delineate a limit, and therefore a condition, of rule-governed language. The bifurcation between these options, then, is whether one views such remarks as articulations of a deficiency—or of an insight.

## 5. Bibliography

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