

Wittgenstein on Rules. Justification, Grammar, and Agreement, by James R. Shaw. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. x +319

James Shaw has written an excellent book on Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations. It manages to provide fresh perspectives on a topic on which it seemed difficult to say something new. It achieves this by leaving the secondary literature largely to one side in the first instance, and engaging directly with Wittgenstein's writings, mainly a sequence of sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009: here cited as PI followed by section number) containing a sustained treatment of the issue. Once his exegetical proposal is developed in this way, Shaw moves on to contrasting his ideas with those of other interpreters, mainly Saul Kripke (Kripke 1982). Throughout the book, Shaw conveys the sense of a genuine effort to understand the insights contained in Wittgenstein's difficult text, displaying a remarkable combination of rigour and creativity.

Shaw advertises his reading of the rule-following considerations as a bipartite reading, by which he means that he sees Wittgenstein as engaged in two independent projects concerning rule following, each addressing a different question. I'd like to consider each of these projects in turn.

The first project Wittgenstein is pursuing, on Shaw's reading, is the *justificatory project*. Its subject matter is the *Justificatory Question*:

what justification (or, equivalently, what reason), broadly on the model of ordinary justifications, do we have for following a rule in the way we do, such that even if a bizarre misinterpreter were to possess that justification, they would apply the rule as we would to new cases? (p. 23)

Contrary to what the language suggests, Wittgenstein's engagement with this project doesn't aim at providing an answer to the Justificatory Question. On the contrary, his ultimate goal in searching for the requisite justifications is to show that the search cannot be completed—that no such justifications exist. In this sense, as Shaw puts it, the search should be seen as 'a kind of feigned or illustrative exercise' (p. 3).

The precise content of Shaw's claim that Wittgenstein is engaged in the justificatory project is not transparent. I think it is uncontroversial that Wittgenstein doesn't think that the kind of justification the justificatory question calls for is available, and that convincing his readers of this point is one of the main goals of some of the passages of the *Investigations* Shaw focuses on. If this is what Shaw is claiming, then I agree with him, and it's hard to see how a reader of the *Investigations* could possibly disagree.

However, there are good reasons for thinking that Shaw sees himself as making a stronger claim. Concerning Wittgenstein's answer to the Justificatory Question—that 'no justification of the sought-after kind exists' (p. 38), he writes:

It is controversial whether Wittgenstein really asks the Justificatory Question in the way I've framed it but, given that he asks it, it should be uncontroversial that this is his answer. (p. 38)

Thus we have, on the one hand, the uncontroversial point that the rule-following considerations reject the existence of the kind of justification called for by the Justificatory Question. And on the other hand we have a controversial claim to the effect that Wittgenstein really asks the Justificatory Question in the way framed by Shaw. What is Shaw's controversial claim?

One claim Shaw makes in this area is definitely controversial. He argues convincingly (p. 11) that, on the most common interpretation of the rule-following considerations, Wittgenstein is engaged in a *constitutivist project*—to provide an account of what it consists in to mean one thing rather than another by our words, or to mean a number series in a certain way. Shaw argues, to the contrary, that Wittgenstein is not directly (see below) engaged with the constitutivist project, and that the passages that are usually read as contributing to this project should be read instead as pursuing the justificatory project.

Engagement with the constitutivist project can be positive or negative. On the one hand, one might articulate and defend proposals as to what meaning and understanding consist in. On the other, one might argue that the requisite account is not to be had—that it's not possible to provide a satisfactory account of what meaning and understanding consist in. It is perhaps possible to attribute to Wittgenstein a positive engagement with the constitutivist project, but the position that Shaw considers and rejects is the view, defended notably by Kripke, that the rule-following considerations contain an argument for the conclusion that it's not possible to identify the facts that ascriptions of meaning, understanding and rule-following represent as obtaining. Shaw rejects this view. According to him, arguing that the constitutivist project cannot be completed is not among Wittgenstein's goals. Is Shaw's position plausible?

A potentially relevant factor on this point is the fact that Shaw focuses his reading on sections 185-242 of the *Investigations*. This is unusual, in that most commentators, including Kripke, take the rule-following passages in the *Investigations* to start considerably earlier, at around PI 138. This difference is relevant to the point under discussion for the following reason: the sections that Shaw leaves out can be naturally read as primarily engaged in the constitutivist project. Their main goal appears to be to refute what might be intuitively seen as the most plausible view on what meaning and understanding consist in—the view that they consist in something that goes on in the subject's mind when she understands a linguistic expression or a number sequence.

The issue is taken up in PI 138, right at the beginning of the set of sections included by other commentators but excluded by Shaw. There, Wittgenstein raises the question, whether your understanding of the word 'cube', when you grasp its meaning 'at a stroke' can consist in what comes before your mind at that moment. Wittgenstein concludes that this proposal is mistaken. Two subjects can have the same item (e.g. a picture) before their minds when they understand the word but still apply the word differently. And when this happens it would be wrong to say that the two subjects attach the same meaning to the word (PI 140).

Wittgenstein goes on to apply the same line of reasoning in other contexts, drawing in each case the same negative conclusion.

In PI 138-84, like elsewhere in the *Investigations*, different trains of thought intermingle in complex ways, but it strikes me as undeniable that the dominant theme here is an argument for the conclusion that meaning, understanding and related notions cannot consist in the occurrence of a mental state or process. And this argument and its conclusion are naturally described as a (negative) contribution to the constitutivist project.

Shaw discusses these pre-185 passages in Chapter 3 and notes the tensions with his reading. One problem is that if we read these passages as dealing with the Justificatory Question, it's hard to understand why the question is only raised later, at PI 185. As Shaw puts it: 'So why are we finding the Justificatory Problem raised at this later juncture?' (p. 46). His answer invokes the nonlinear structure of Wittgenstein's book. That pre-185 remarks 'might simultaneously be building resources to *also* address a problem which is most sharply formulated later in the text is just a testament to the "criss-crossing" character of the *Investigations* that Wittgenstein highlights in its preface' (p. 47).

Shaw also concedes that some ways in which Wittgenstein attacks 'mental accompaniment' views of meaning and understanding 'don't fit neatly into what I've called the "Justificatory Investigation"' (p. 55), but he puts this down again to the fact 'that the 'criss-crossing' character of Wittgenstein's remarks in the *Investigations* may involve Wittgenstein with a number of interrelated targets over the course of even the rule-following sections' (p. 62).

These explanations are not without plausibility, but the evidence seems to me to lend more support to the alternative hypothesis, that Wittgenstein's discussion of accounts of meaning and understanding as mental processes is a contribution to the constitutivist project.

One might argue, however, that these passages demonstrate only a limited interest in the constitutivist project—to refute one particular account of meaning and understanding, leaving the possibility open that a satisfactory constitutive account might be found elsewhere. I don't think this is a plausible reading of Wittgenstein's position. His attitude to other approaches to the constitutivist project seems no less critical (see, e.g., PI 149). Furthermore, as I'll argue below, there are important reasons for ascribing to Wittgenstein the view that the constitutivist project cannot be completed.

Shaw offers reasons in support of his view that the passages that are usually interpreted as raising the constitutivist question should be interpreted instead as raising the justificatory question. One is that Wittgenstein's discussion is 'constrained by epistemic requirements that needn't, and perhaps shouldn't, immediately constrain any investigation into meaning-constituting facts generally' (p. 11. See also p. 26). Whether our search for meaning-constituting facts must be constrained by epistemic requirements is a big question on which both sides are in principle defensible. But what matters for assessing Shaw's argument on this point is whether Wittgenstein himself, rightly or wrongly, saw the search for meaning-constituting facts as constrained by epistemic requirements. Shaw's argument relies on a negative answer to this question, but I think a positive answer has some plausibility.

One passage where Wittgenstein gives the distinct impression of imposing epistemic requirements on the constitutive project is PI 153. There he rejects the idea that if we

discover a process that happens in every case of understanding, we can identify that process with understanding. He supports this rejection with the following rhetorical question:

Indeed, how can the process of understanding have been hidden, given that I said “Now I understand” because I *did* understand? (PI 153)

It seems to me that Wittgenstein is assuming here that if there is a process that is the understanding, this has to be a process that’s not ‘hidden’—one of which the subject is aware at the time of understanding, with this awareness as the source of her conviction that she understands. If this is the right reading of the passage, then, contrary to what Shaw’s argument assumes, Wittgenstein sees the constitutivist project as constrained by epistemic requirements.

Another reason Shaw offers for the claim that Wittgenstein cannot have been interested in the constitutivist project is that ‘Wittgenstein does not even *countenance* skepticism, let alone address it’ (p. 5). On Kripke’s reading, Wittgenstein derives from the impossibility of accomplishing the constitutivist project the sceptical conclusion that there are no facts about meaning or rule following. But Shaw points out, to my mind correctly, that Wittgenstein does not see the existence of facts about meaning and rule following as threatened by his discussion of these notions. Does this support Shaw’s conclusion that Wittgenstein is not interested in showing that the constitutivist project cannot be completed?

One could argue that this consideration doesn’t lend genuine support to Shaw’s conclusion. The conclusion would follow if Wittgenstein thought that the completion of the constitutivist project was the only available method for vindicating facts about meaning and rule following. Kripke assumes that this is so, but Shaw argues convincingly (see below) that, for Wittgenstein, there’s another strategy—the grammatical project—for achieving the same goal. If we agree with Shaw, as I think we should, that Wittgenstein saw the grammatical project as a satisfactory strategy for vindicating facts about meaning and rule following, that will explain why he doesn’t see the existence of these facts as threatened by the impossibility of completing the constitutivist project. Wittgenstein could be arguing that the constitutivist project cannot be completed while not regarding scepticism as a possible outcome.

Shaw contends that Wittgenstein’s treatment of dispositions provides additional evidence for his view that Wittgenstein was not concerned with the constitutivist project. He quotes in this connection a passage from the *Brown Book*:

Or do you mean by knowing some kind of disposition?—then only experience can teach us what it was a disposition for.—‘But surely if one had asked me which number he should write after 1568, I should have answered “1569”’—I dare say you would, but how can you be sure of it? (Wittgenstein 1969: 142)

Shaw sees the question that opens the passage as providing evidence for his reading:

Note that Wittgenstein asks, “do you mean by knowing some kind of disposition?” not (as would seem more appropriate if we are asking constitutive questions) “do you mean by having some kind of disposition?” (p. 28)

Shaw seems to be reading this passage as if ‘by knowing some kind of disposition’ were an answer offered by Wittgenstein’s interlocutor to the question under discussion. And Shaw’s point is that if the question under discussion were the constitutive question, ‘what makes “1569” the right number to write?’, an answer to this question in terms of dispositions could be expected to invoke the fact that this is what I’m disposed to do. But the answer given by the interlocutor doesn’t mention my having a disposition, but my knowledge of a disposition. Shaw treats this circumstance as evidence that the question under discussion is not the constitutive question, ‘what makes “1569” the right number to write?’, but the justificatory question, ‘how am I justified in writing “1569”?’.

I think Shaw is misreading the *Brown Book* passage, as we can see by considering the context from which it is extracted:

But here you are misled by the grammar of the word “to know”. Was knowing this [that you meant him to follow up 100 by 101] some mental act by which you at the time made the transition from 100 to 101, e.g., some act like saying to yourself: “I want him to write 101 after 100”? In this case ask yourself how many such acts you performed when you gave him the rule. Or do you mean by knowing some kind of disposition?—then only experience can teach us what it was a disposition for. (Wittgenstein 1969: 142)

Shaw reads ‘do you mean by knowing some kind of disposition?’ as: ‘are you offering knowledge of a disposition as an answer to the question under discussion?’. But it seems to me that this is not the right way to read the passage. What’s being discussed is the grammar of the word ‘to know’. Wittgenstein considers two approaches to this: treating knowledge as a mental act and treating it as a disposition. The question ‘do you mean by knowing some kind of disposition?’ is a question about how knowledge should be understood—whether it should be identified with some kind of disposition. The question is whether knowledge is a disposition, not whether knowledge of a disposition can answer some question. If I’m reading the passage correctly, it lends no support to Shaw’s claim that Wittgenstein is not engaged with the constitutive question.

The fact remains, though, that Wittgenstein is sympathetic to the idea that knowledge of how a numerical series should be continued is a dispositional or counterfactual (PI 187) notion. If we read this as endorsing a constitutive account of knowledge along dispositionalist lines, it would be hard to square with the idea that Wittgenstein rejects the possibility of completing the constitutivist project (see in this connection Shaw’s remark that by conceding that the relevant dispositions exist, Wittgenstein seems ‘to practically give the entire game up to the dispositional theorist’ (p. 29)).

But I think it would be perverse to read Wittgenstein as endorsing a constitutive account of knowledge along dispositional lines. It is clear that he proposes to adopt a grammatical approach to the word ‘to know’, along the lines of the grammatical project that Shaw

attributes to him for rule following (see below). The grammar of the word is explicitly the subject matter of the *Brown Book* passage. Notice also the vague language there ('some kind of disposition') and in the *Investigations* ('amounts to something like' (PI 187)). And Wittgenstein's grammatical approach to the word 'to know' is clear throughout his discussion of the topic (see, e.g., PI 150-51). Wittgenstein's endorsement of a link between knowledge and dispositions or counterfactuals should be read in this grammatical key, rather than as putting forward a constitutive account (on this point, see p. 211). Once again, we don't have a cogent reason for thinking that Wittgenstein is not negatively engaged in the constitutivist project.

The second project that Wittgenstein pursues in the rule-following considerations, according to Shaw, is the grammatical project. It aims at answering the Grammatical Question:

how do we use the expressions "follows a rule" or "means a rule in such-and-such a way", or "follows a rule with [some] understanding"? What factors influence when we are, and are not, inclined to say that rules are being followed or not? (p. 71)

By highlighting this aspect of Wittgenstein's thought, Shaw is making an important contribution to our understanding of Wittgenstein's ideas. In the rule-following passages, especially after PI 197, Wittgenstein makes some striking substantive claims about the nature of rule-following, e.g.: it is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which only one person followed a rule (PI 199); following a rule is a practice; it's not possible to follow a rule privately (PI 202). These claims appear to have the form of necessary conditions for rule following, and hence to be potential contributions to the constitutivist project.

Shaw argues persuasively that this is not the character of Wittgenstein's claims. His aim is instead to provide a description of how we are inclined to use rule-following language—to identify 'features of the circumstance of behavior that influence our willingness to treat that behavior as involving rule-following or linguistic meaning' (p. 94. See also p. 152). In the grammatical project, Shaw contends, Wittgenstein follows the methodology of family resemblance (see PI 65-67):

he is indeed looking for something like *criteria* for having followed a rule, but not in any way that would supply something like necessary and sufficient conditions for its presence. Rather, the goal is to clarify the structure of a network of nonexhaustive, open-ended, overlapping criteria that underlie the concept's application. (p. 96)

In his grammatical investigations, Wittgenstein describes imagined situations that differ from actuality in the presence or absence of candidate criteria for rule following, in order to determine how these differences affect our inclinations to apply rule-following language. Shaw provides excellent detailed discussions of specific applications of this methodology in Chapter 3, and especially in Chapter 4, concerning the role of agreement in our rule-following verdicts. Here Shaw comes across as doing precisely the work that Wittgenstein intended his reader to do (p. 73).

I think Shaw makes a compelling case that Wittgenstein should be read as following these methodological principles, but, as Shaw realises, this leaves the question open of what would be achieved by a grammatical investigation of rule following, ‘why we would bother to describe actual usage’ (p. 67).

Shaw argues that Wittgenstein expected his grammatical investigation to achieve, in some way, the goals of the constitutivist project:

The Grammatical Investigation is supposed to exhibit the proper method for investigating the facts that “constitute” meaning, understanding, and rule-following, at least in a limited sense of “constitution” that Wittgenstein allows for family resemblance concepts. (p. 176. See also pp. 101-2)

I think Shaw is absolutely right about this, but some work is needed in order to understand the respect in which we can get from a grammatical investigation something like what one might expect to get from a constitutive account.

Here the issue of Wittgenstein’s attitude to the constitutivist project comes to the fore again. Suppose a satisfactory constitutive account of rule following were available. We could of course still investigate, in addition, ‘features of the circumstance of behavior that influence our willingness to treat that behavior as involving rule-following’. This may well be an interesting area of research, but if a constitutive account of the concept were available, the grammatical project could not have any ‘transcendental or constitutive pretensions’, to borrow a phrase from Paul Boghossian, in a passage cited by Shaw (p. 101). The project would have the same status as an investigation, say, into the features that influenced the willingness of pre-Lavoisier speakers to treat a substance as water—or to ascribe the term ‘water’ to it. If this is right, it follows that in order to legitimately ascribe any kind of constitutive significance to his grammatical investigation concerning rule following, Wittgenstein must be committed to the unavailability of a constitutive account of the concept.

Assume, then, that a constitutive account of rule following is not to be had. In what sense could we say that the grammatical project addresses ‘a perfectly legitimate question about constitution’? One possibility would be to see the grammatical investigation as providing a new kind of constitutive account—one according to which what makes it the case that someone is following a rule at a certain time does not depend on what goes on in the subject at that time, but on a very complex combination of circumstantial factors spread across time and space. On this reading, in saying that there is nothing in which rule following consists, the advocate of the grammatical project might merely be saying ‘that there is nothing in which it *locally* consists’ (p. 99). Then her proposal would be indistinguishable from the view that a constitutive account is available, but the facts it must appeal to are much more complicated and scattered than traditional advocates of the constitutive approach might have expected. I think Shaw finds this interpretation of Wittgenstein’s grammatical methodology unsatisfactory, and I agree with him.

Shaw provides a very insightful characterisation of what Wittgenstein must be claiming to vindicate the constitutive credentials of the grammatical method:

What we need to jettison, according to Wittgenstein, is the idea that for a term to be meaningful its use must be bound by definite, stateable criteria, or that understanding the meaning of a term consists in grasping such criteria. (p. 100)

And he sees the meaningfulness achievable in these circumstances as potentially of the fact-stating kind:

If Wittgenstein is right, there are no exhaustive, stateable criteria for something's being a game. But Wittgenstein does not suggest, and few commentators have attributed to him, the view that this therefore means there are no games, or no facts about games, and so on. (p. 99)

On the picture that emerges, the existence of a network of nonexhaustive, open-ended, overlapping criteria underlying a term's application is in principle sufficient for the fact-stating meaningfulness of the term. But this way of characterising the view suggests that the difference between the grammatical method and the constitutivist method is simply the difference between vagueness and precision, and I don't think this conception of the contrast gets to the heart of Wittgenstein's proposal.

I think the contrast can be more profitably characterised as concerning two alternative accounts of the meaning ground of the target term—of the facts by virtue of which the term has the meaning it has. On the account associated with the constitutivist project, what makes a term have the meaning it has is its relation to the item in the world that the term denotes, and the goal of the constitutive project is to identify the item playing this role. On the account associated with the grammatical project, by contrast, what makes a term have the meaning it has is features of the way the term is used, and the goal of the grammatical project is to identify the use-features playing this role. (In (Zalabardo 2023) I have used for these approaches the labels *representationalism* and *pragmatism*). Shaw doesn't characterise Wittgenstein's proposal in quite these terms, but what he does say suggests to me that he might find my characterisation reasonably congenial.

On this reading, in adopting the grammatical approach with respect to rule following, Wittgenstein would be claiming that what makes 'follows a rule' and related terms have the meaning they have is features of the way they are used—the meaningfulness of the terms would be grounded in these features. Notice, however, that it is not part of the view that we can specify what the term means by reference to these use-features. Advocates of the view would endorse one of the seminal contributions to the foundations of semantics that Shaw attributes to Wittgenstein: 'the importance of maintaining the separation between the conditions that give rise to meaning and the contents of the meanings created by these conditions' (p. 4). On this position, there would be no non-trivial specification of the meaning of rule-following language, but the language would still be meaningful, and potentially fact-stating, by virtue of the use-features that ground its meaning.

Even if we could formulate in terms of use-features necessary and sufficient conditions for a term to have the meaning of 'follows a rule', this wouldn't give us a constitutive account of rule following. We would then have necessary and sufficient conditions, not for when someone counts as following a rule, but for when someone counts as ascribing rule

following. But Wittgenstein's grammatical investigation won't give us even that, since he expects to ground the meaning of 'follows a rule' with a nonexhaustive and open-ended network of use-features, not with necessary and sufficient conditions for the term to have the meaning it has.

While this review has focused on Part I of Shaw's book, Part II also contains a wealth of material no less deserving of attention. Highlights include an insightful discussion in Chapter 9 of the role of dispositions in Wittgenstein's overall position, a proposal in Chapter 10 for how to extract from the reading of Wittgenstein's views developed in Part I an answer to Kripke's sceptic, and a fascinating account in Chapter 11 of the extent to which Wittgenstein's views might carry relativistic consequences.

In sum, Shaw's book is an important contribution to our understanding of Wittgenstein's ideas on rule following. It contains valuable proposals both on the exegesis of Wittgenstein's text and on the philosophical issues it covers. Readers with an interest in these topics will find the book rewarding.*

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