

“Following According to a Rule Is FUNDAMENTAL to Our Language-Game” Rules and Meaning in Wittgenstein

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Abstract It is commonly thought that, according to the later Wittgenstein, the meanings of words are determined by rules and using language involves following those rules. Against that standard interpretation, Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss have argued that, though Wittgenstein did hold these views in his middle period, he decisively rejected them in his mature work. And, they think, he was right to do so. The paper defends the standard interpretation on textual and philosophical grounds: both as an account of Wittgenstein’s later views and as a philosophical position in its own right.

Keywords Rule-Following. Wittgenstein. Meaning. Philosophical Investigations. On Certainty.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Some Textual Evidence for the “Received View”. – 2.1 Following a Rule “Characterizes Description” – 2.2 Using a Word as “Following Certain Rules” – 2.3 Rules and the Meanings of Logical Constants – 3 Glüer and Wikforss’s Textual Evidence Against the “Received View”. – 3.1 *Philosophical Investigations*. – 3.2 *On Certainty*. – 4 Following Rules and Conforming to Rules. – 4.1 “Our Grammar is Lacking in [...] Perspicuity” (PI, § 122). – 4.2 Crispin Wright and Basic Rule-Following.



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1 Introduction

What is the connection between linguistic meaning and rules? In *Philosophical Investigations*, and in Wittgenstein's later philosophy more generally, the discussion of meaning is intertwined with the discussion of rules and rule-following. And despite the continuing controversy about how exactly to understand his views about rules and rule-following, there is widespread agreement about how he sees the relation between meaning and rules. According to that general consensus, what a word means is a matter of the rules for its use. To grasp the meaning of a word is to grasp the rules for its use. And using the word with that meaning is a matter of following those rules. As Wittgenstein's student and literary executor, Rush Rhees, puts it, when “I have learned what [an expression] means [...] I have learned a rule” (Rhees 1954, 77); and “using [expressions] in their meanings is what we call following a rule” (88).

Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss have challenged the “received view [...] that the later Wittgenstein subscribes to [...] the thesis [that] speaking a language is a rule-guided activity” (Glüer, Wikforss 2010, 148).¹ They argue that the later Wittgenstein does not think that meaning is determined by rules. Instead, he thinks that the meanings of words are determined by use: by the practice of applying them. Though he rejects the received view, they argue, he does hold that there is a fruitful *analogy* between meaning and rules. For instance, following a rule is a custom, a usage, an institution; so is using language to make a report, to give an order, and so on (PI, § 199). An action is correct or incorrect in the light of rule; similarly, an application of a word is correct or incorrect given its meaning. And so on. The reason why the discussion of rules and rule-following in Wittgenstein's later philosophy is so closely related to his discussion of meaning is that “he is exploring the analogy between meaning and rules” (Glüer, Wikforss 2010, 150). But, Glüer and Wikforss insist, it is only an analogy. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein does not conceive of speaking a language as a matter of following meaning-determining rules.

Though they reject the ‘received view’ of Wittgenstein's position in *Philosophical Investigations*, Glüer and Wikforss acknowledge – indeed, insist – that Wittgenstein's middle-period writings of the early 1930s do conceive of meaning as constituted by rules and of language as a rule-guided activity. Thus, for instance, he wrote in 1931 that an ostensive definition of a colour word is a rule:

¹ I shall use the expression “received view” sometimes to refer to a view about Wittgenstein's philosophy (the view that Wittgenstein thinks of speaking a language as a rule-governed activity) and sometimes to refer to a philosophical view (the view that speaking a language is a rule-governed activity). The context should always make clear which is meant.

the ostensive explanation “That is ‘red’” [...] is one of the symbolic rules for the use of the word ‘red’. (Ms 110, 213[7], 24 June 1931. See also Ts-213,176r[5])²

And he held that the meaning of a word is given by the rules for its use:

There can be no debate about whether these or other rules are the right ones for the word ‘not’ (I mean, whether they accord with its meaning). For without these rules, the word has as yet no meaning; and if we change the rules, it now has another meaning (or none), and in that case we may just as well change the word too. (Ms 110, 133[3], 3 March 1931)³

Now if we are to understand language as a rule-guided activity, we need some account of what it is for a speaker to follow or be guided by linguistic rules, as opposed to merely acting in accordance with them. And, according to Glüer and Wikforss, having struggled to develop an account of linguistic rule-following in his middle-period writings, Wittgenstein came to see that no satisfactory account could be given. In his later writings, therefore, he abandoned the idea that understanding language is a matter of following rules. On their interpretation, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 198-202, which is often seen as a statement of the received view, actually argues against the association of meaning with rules. And, they suggest, Wittgenstein’s rejection of the received view emerges particularly clearly in his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*, which “leaves no room for doubt” that he thinks only that there is an *analogy* between meaning and rules (Glüer, Wikforss 2010, 150).

The target of Glüer and Wikforss’s critique is, as we have seen, the “received view” that “speaking a language is a rule-guided activity”. That formulation of the view combines two elements: there is the idea that the meaning of a word is *constituted* or *determined* by rules for using it; and there is the idea that using a word involves *following* or *being guided* by those rules. Glüer and Wikforss’s discussion focuses mainly on the second element. In a fuller treatment of the topic, it would be worth reflecting on the relation between the two elements. For instance, would it be coherent to hold that the meanings of words are constituted by rules for using them but that someone can

² References in this form are to items from Wittgenstein’s Nachlass, using the versions available at Wittgenstein Source <http://www.wittgensteinsource.org>.

³ The translation is taken from PI, § 549. The *Big Typescript* version of the remark continues: “Thus these rules are arbitrary, because it is the rules that first give meaning to the sign” (BT, 234-5).

grasp the meanings of those words, and use them with those meanings, without following or being guided by those rules? For present purposes, however, I leave those questions aside.

I shall defend the “received interpretation” of Wittgenstein’s later views on rules and meaning against Glüer and Wikforss’s interpretative case against it. And I shall defend the claim that speaking a language involves following rules against their substantive philosophical attack.

2 Some Textual Evidence for the “Received View”

Before considering Glüer and Wikforss’s case for rejecting the “received view” of Wittgenstein on rules and meaning, I will point to some passages that strongly support the received interpretation. Of course there may be evidence on both sides. But, at a minimum, a defence of Glüer and Wikforss’s interpretation needs to explain how it is consistent with the passages I shall cite.

2.1 Following a Rule “Characterizes Description”

In *Remarks on Foundations of Mathematics*, Wittgenstein writes this:

Following according to the rule is FUNDAMENTAL to our language-game. It characterizes what we call description. (RFM, VI, § 28 (Ms-164,81[2], 1941.01.01?-1944.12.31?))

On the face of it, that passage says that when we use words to describe something we are following a rule for the use of those words. Someone might point out that Wittgenstein thinks that not all language-use involves *describing*; so even if we agree that following a rule characterises *description*, it doesn’t follow that *every* use of language involves following rules. Maybe so. But many uses of language *do* involve describing. And if we accept that describing involves following rules for the words we employ in our description, there seems just as much reason to accept that giving an order, say, or asking a question, involves following rules.

It is worth quoting the context in which Wittgenstein makes this remark. He writes:

Someone asks me: What is the colour of this flower? I answer: “red”.—Are you absolutely sure? Yes, absolutely sure! But may I not have been deceived and called the wrong colour “red”? No. The certainty with which I call the colour “red” is the rigidity of

my measuring-rod, it is the rigidity from which I start. When I give descriptions, *that* is not to be brought into doubt. This simply characterizes what we call describing.

(I may of course even here assume a slip of the tongue, but nothing else.) (RFM, VI, § 28)

Then comes the claim that following according to a rule is FUNDAMENTAL to our language-game. Applying the claim to the example that precedes it, Wittgenstein seems absolutely clear that applying the word 'red' to a flower involves following a rule.

2.2 Using a Word as "Following Certain Rules"

In *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics* Wittgenstein says this:

If you have learned a technique of language, and I point to this coat and say to you, "The tailors now call this colour 'Boo'" then you will buy me a coat of this colour, fetch one, etc. The point is that one only has to point to something and say, "This is so-and-so", and everyone who has been through a certain preliminary training will react in the same way. We could imagine this not to happen. If I just say, "This is called 'Boo'" you might not know what I mean; but in fact you would all of you automatically follow certain rules.

Ought we to say that you would follow the *right* rules?—that you would know *the* meaning of "boo"? No, clearly not. For which meaning? Are there not 10,000 meanings which "boo" might now have? [...] To know its meaning is to use it *in the same way* as other people do. "In the right way" means nothing. (LFM, 182-3)

In that passage, Wittgenstein takes it for granted that using the word 'Boo' with a given meaning involves following certain rules for the use of 'Boo'. His view is not that there is an *analogy* between using a word and following rules. He is saying that using a word *is* following rules.

The passage comes from lectures Wittgenstein gave in 1939. So someone might suggest that the views expressed belong to his middle period, when he did think of language as a rule-guided activity, and do not threaten Glüer and Wikforss's account of his position in *Philosophical Investigations* and beyond. But they themselves suggest that Wittgenstein's mature views about rules and meaning are already starting to be visible in the *Brown Book*, which was dictated

in 1934-35.⁴ So it would be surprising for them to argue that the views expressed in the 1939 lectures belong with his middle period rather than his later view of rules and meaning.

2.3 Rules and the Meanings of Logical Constants

In the Introduction, I quoted a passage from Ms110, which was composed in March 1931:

There can be no debate about whether these or other rules are the right ones for the word ‘not’ (I mean, whether they accord with its meaning). For without these rules, the word has as yet no meaning; and if we change the rules, it now has another meaning (or none), and in that case we may just as well change the word too.

That remark, which dates from Wittgenstein’s middle period, is an explicit statement of the view that the meaning of a word is a matter of the rules for its use. But the passage does not just appear in Ms110; it also occurs in *Philosophical Investigations*, as paragraph (b) in the boxed comment following § 549. Of course its appearance in that context does not show that Wittgenstein still endorsed this view at the point when he attached this comment to the typescript of *Philosophical Investigations*. Hacker and Schulte say that the boxed comments in *Philosophical Investigations* were “probably meant to be taken into account in future revisions of the text” (PI, xxi). But who can say what such a revision would have involved? Maybe Wittgenstein would have used this remark as an example of a view that is tempting but should ultimately be rejected.

However, there is good reason to think that Wittgenstein did not come to reject that view, and that when he attached this remark to the typescript of *Philosophical Investigations* he still held the view it expresses. For a passage from RFM, composed in March 1944, offers essentially the same account of the connection between meaning and rules as the Ms110 remark from 1931:

Is logical inference correct when it has been made according to rules; or when it is made according to *correct* rules? Would it be wrong, for example, if it were said that p should always be inferred from $\neg p$? But why should one not rather say: such a rule would not give the signs ‘ $\neg p$ ’ and ‘ p ’ their usual meaning?

⁴ “In the *Brown Book*”, they write, “Wittgenstein suggests that rules cannot play the fundamental role in our linguistic practices that they had earlier been ascribed” (Glüer, Wikforss 2010, 155).

We can conceive the rules of inference—I want to say—as giving the signs their meaning, because they are rules for the use of these signs. So that the rules of inference are involved in the determination of the meaning of the signs. In this sense rules of inference cannot be right or wrong. (RFM, VII, § 30, Ms 124,113[2], 9th March 1944)

All the indications are that Wittgenstein wrote that remark in 1944 as an expression of what he thought at the time. There is no reason to treat it simply as a record of a view he had held more than ten years earlier and had now given up.

3 **Glüer and Wikforss’s Textual Evidence Against the “Received View”**

3.1 *Philosophical Investigations*

Glüer and Wikforss argue that the text of *Philosophical Investigations* – and specifically the key discussion of rule-following leading up to §§ 201-2 – supports their contention that Wittgenstein came to reject the received view. They write:

For a rule to guide a speaker, Wittgenstein holds, an expression of the rule has to be involved in the speaker’s use of terms. However, any expression can be variously interpreted; consequently, the idea that meaning is determined by rules leads to a regress of interpretations: “‘But how can the rule show me what I have to do at *this* point? Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the rule’. – That is not what we ought to say, but rather: any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give [it] any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning” (PI, § 198). Thus, Wittgenstein is here rejecting his own earlier idea that meaning is determined by rules that guide our use – instead, he suggests, meaning is determined by this use itself, by the *practice* of applying the sign. (Glüer, Wikforss 2010, 155)

But Glüer and Wikforss’s reading seems to me to mistake the significance of § 198.

In the first place, the topic of § 198 is not specifically how a *linguistic* rule can show me what I have to do at a particular point; the discussion concerns rules in general. Indeed, the only example of a rule that Wittgenstein gives in this section involves a signpost. A signpost, he says, is an expression of a rule: as we might say, an expression of

the rule *go this way*. His question is, how *can* the signpost show me that I have to go *this way*? And the lesson of Wittgenstein’s discussion is a general one: the rule does determine what I have to do at this point; but its determining what I have to do does not depend on its being supplemented by an interpretation. That is the message of § 198 and of the closely-related § 201: “[T]here is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an interpretation”.

Glüer and Wikforss argue that § 198 rules out the “idea that meaning is determined by rules”. If the idea that meaning is determined by rules depended on the idea that meaning is determined by interpretations, it would indeed be a non-starter. That is the point of § 198: if a rule cannot determine anything unless it is supplemented by an interpretation then, by the same token, an interpretation cannot determine anything unless it is supplemented by another interpretation, and so on; if we go down that path, the whole idea of anything being determined by a rule collapses. But there is no reason to think that the idea that meaning is determined by rules *does* depend on the idea that meaning is determined by interpretations. And as far as I can see, § 198 says nothing at all against the idea that the meaning of a word is a matter of rules for its use.

Glüer and Wikforss make a further interpretative point against the received view. They remind us that, for the later Wittgenstein, meaning is determined by use. But that view, they suggest, is inconsistent with the idea that meaning is rule-determined; the earlier idea that meaning is determined by rules, they think, is *replaced* in Wittgenstein’s later work by the idea that meaning is determined by use.⁵

Contrary to what Glüer and Wikforss say, however, there is no tension between the idea that the meaning of a word depends on the rules for its use and the idea that the meaning of a word is determined by use. Consider the analogy between language and games. Chess is the game it is in virtue of having the rules it does. But chess, with the rules that define it, did not appear in the world by magic. We might have used the same pieces to play a different game, or none at all. The game of Chess exists, and has the rules it does, because we play it according to those rules: because we ‘use’ the pieces in the way we do. Similarly for linguistic meaning. Wittgenstein says that the meaning of the word ‘not’, say, is determined by the rules for its use. But what determines that those *are* the rules for the use of that word is the way that we use it: specifically, our using the word ‘not’ according to those rules. Had we used the word ‘not’ in a different way, observing different rules, it would have had a different meaning. In short, the idea that the meaning of a word is determined by our use of the word is not in competition with the idea that meaning

⁵ For this argument, see Glüer, Wikforss (2010, 156).

is determined by rules. On the contrary, it is an essential accompaniment to it.

3.2 *On Certainty*

According to Glüer and Wikforss, it is in Wittgenstein’s latest writings – the notebooks published as *On Certainty* – that we see the clearest and most explicit rejection of the idea that using words is a matter of following rules. They highlight two passages in particular. But neither passage, I shall argue, gives compelling support to their reading of Wittgenstein.

The first passage is *On Certainty*, § 46. In German:

Das Wichtigste aber ist: Es braucht die Regel nicht. Es geht uns nicht ab.

And in the published translation:

But the most important thing is: The rule is not needed. Nothing is lacking.

Taken in isolation, that remark might be thought to imply that language has no need for rules and that speaking a language is not a matter of following rules. But when we look at the context in which it occurs, we can see that that is not what Wittgenstein is saying at all.

A preliminary point is this. The passage that Glüer and Wikforss quote from OC, § 46 continues like this:

We do calculate according to a rule, and that is enough.

So Wittgenstein is talking not about language-use in general but about a case of calculating according to a rule. He says, of that case, that our calculating according to a rule “is enough”. Whatever he means when he says that “the rule is not needed”, then, he is not denying that calculation is a rule-governed activity or that, when we calculate, we are acting according to a rule.

What is the point of the passage? OC, § 46 is part of Wittgenstein’s discussion of a question that is raised some twenty remarks earlier:

One may be wrong even about “there being a hand here”. Only in particular circumstances is it impossible.—“Even in a calculation one can be wrong—only in certain circumstances one can’t.”

But can it be seen from a *rule* what circumstances logically exclude a mistake in the employment of rules of calculation?

What use is a rule to us here? Mightn't we (in turn) go wrong in applying it?

If, however, one wanted to give something like a rule here, then it would contain the expression "in normal circumstances". And we recognize normal circumstances but cannot precisely describe them. At most, we can describe a range of abnormal ones. (OC, §§ 25-7)

Wittgenstein is interested in the kind of certainty that attaches to such Moorean propositions as "there is a hand here" or "I have two hands". In some circumstances, he thinks, I could be wrong in thinking that I have two hands; consider how things might be after an accident or a medical procedure, say. But in normal circumstances, according to Wittgenstein, the proposition "I have two hands" is a basic certainty: I cannot give grounds for believing it; I couldn't be making a mistake about it; and so on. Similarly for mathematical calculations. In some circumstances, he thinks, it makes good sense to suppose that we have made a mistake when we perform some calculation: when I calculate the product of two ten-digit numbers, for instance, it is easy to see that my answer could be mistaken. In other circumstances, however, one cannot be wrong in a calculation: he insists, for instance, that we couldn't all be making a mistake in thinking that $12 \times 12 = 144$; in such a case, a mistake is "logically excluded". Now the question Wittgenstein presses in the quoted passage from OC, §§ 25-7 is this: what distinguishes the case where a mistake in applying the rules of calculation is logically excluded from the case where such a mistake is perfectly possible? He suggests that there is no general rule for distinguishing between the two kinds of case; we can recognise the difference, case by case, but we cannot give a precise rule for doing so.

Wittgenstein returns to this question in the sections leading up to OC, § 46:

What sort of proposition is this: "We *cannot* have miscalculated in $12 \times 12 = 144$ "? It must surely be a proposition of logic.—But now, is it not the same, or doesn't it come to the same, as the statement $12 \times 12 = 144$?

If you demand a rule from which it follows that there can't have been a miscalculation here, the answer is that we did not learn this through a rule, but by learning to calculate.

We got to know the *nature* of calculating by learning to calculate.

But then can't it be described how we satisfy ourselves of the reliability of a calculation? O yes! Yet no rule emerges when we do

so.—But the most important thing is: The rule is not needed. Nothing is lacking. We do calculate according to a rule, and that is enough. (OC, §§ 43-6)⁶

The message of that discussion is this. When we calculate according to a rule, we do not need *another* rule to tell us whether we could be making a mistake in our application of the first rule. We learn the difference between cases where miscalculation is possible and cases where it is not by learning to calculate, not by learning a rule for distinguishing the two cases. But none of that takes away from the fact that learning to calculate is learning to follow rules: “We do calculate according to a rule”.

Understood in the context in which it appears, then, Wittgenstein’s remark “*Es braucht die Regel nicht*” does nothing to challenge the idea that grasping the meaning of a term involves grasping rules, or that applying the term is a matter of following rules.

The second passage that Glüer and Wikforss quote from *On Certainty* is OC, §§ 61-2, which, they say, “leaves no room for doubt” that Wittgenstein’s view is simply that there is an *analogy* between meaning and rules:

A meaning of a word is a kind of employment of it.

For it is what we learn when the word is incorporated into our language.

That is why there is an analogy between the concepts “meaning” and “rule”. (OC, §§ 61-2)

The final sentence of that passage is given in Glüer and Wikforss’s own translation. The printed translation is different:

That is why there exists a correspondence between the concepts ‘rule’ and ‘meaning’.

And Wittgenstein’s German is this:

Darum besteht eine Entsprechung zwischen den Begriffen ‘Bedeutung’ und ‘Regel’.

Glüer and Wikforss are plainly right to correct the published translation by putting the words “meaning” and “rule” in the same order as

⁶ I have quoted the published translation. But the sense of the last paragraph would in my view be better captured by translating “*Es braucht die Regel nicht*” as “A rule is not needed”, rather than “The rule is not needed”.

their German equivalents. But are they right to translate “*eine Entsprechung*” as “an analogy” rather than “a correspondence”? The suggestion that the concepts “meaning” and rule are *analogous* seems to rule out the idea that what you grasp when you grasp the meaning of a word is a rule or a set of rules. By contrast, that idea is not ruled out by the suggestion that there is a *correspondence* between the concepts “meaning” and “rule”. I am in no position to pass judgement on this question of translation. That said, it does seem plausible that the English “analogy” is a narrower or more specific notion than the German “*Entsprechung*”; after all, German has the word “*Analogie*” to express the narrower notion. At the very least, it is not clear that the passage that Glüer and Wikforss quote from OC, § 62 bears the weight that they put on it, as establishing that Wittgenstein came to think that using a word with a given meaning is definitely not a matter of following rules for its use.⁷

4 Following Rules and Conforming to Rules

So far, I have focused on the textual grounds for accepting or rejecting Glüer and Wikforss’s contention that, in *Philosophical Investigations* and his later work, Wittgenstein rejected the “received view” that speaking a language is a rule-guided activity. But Glüer and Wikforss also argue that the “received view” is unacceptable in its own right. They write:

The received view stands [or] falls with its ability to supply us with a plausible account of what it is to follow, or be guided by, a rule – in contradistinction to merely acting in accordance with one. (Glüer, Wikforss 2010, 156)

And if we try to conceive of using a word as being a matter of following a rule, they argue, we face a choice between three unacceptable options. The first is to accept commitments that Wittgenstein explicitly rejects.⁸ The second is to collapse the distinction between following a rule and acting in accord with a rule, so that every sort of regular behaviour is construed as an instance of rule-following. The third is to endorse a kind of quietism or anti-reductionism that helps itself to the distinction between following a rule and merely

⁷ In a fuller treatment, it would be interesting to examine Wittgenstein’s use of “*Entsprechung*” and its cognates in other contexts for the light they cast on this question of translation. My sense is that that would not provide support for translating “*Entsprechung*” as “analogy”.

⁸ That will only be unacceptable, of course, if we are aiming to give an account of Wittgenstein’s views; it might be an acceptable view in its own right.

acting in accord with a rule without giving any informative account of that distinction.

For reasons of space, I cannot consider all the details of Glüer and Wikforss's case for their view. But I shall argue that Wittgenstein shows us a way to understand language-use as a form of rule-following behaviour that is consistent with his other commitments and maintains the distinction between following a rule and merely acting in accord with a rule. His account of that distinction is an anti-reductionist one; there is no prospect of giving an account of what it is to follow a rule that is entirely non-circular. But there is nothing philosophically unsatisfactory about that.

Wittgenstein writes:

Are the propositions of mathematics anthropological propositions saying how we men infer and calculate?—Is a statute book a work of anthropology telling how the people of this nation deal with a thief etc.?—Could it be said: “The judge looks up a book about anthropology and thereupon sentences the thief to a term of imprisonment?” Well, the judge does not USE the statute book as a manual of anthropology. (RFM, III, § 65)

As Wittgenstein says, there is a difference between an anthropological work that records regularities in people's behaviour and a statue book that sets down rules they follow. But how should we characterise the difference? Central to Wittgenstein's account of the distinction is the idea of *using* something *as a rule*. The judge uses the statutes in the statute book as rules for sentencing criminals. And more generally, following a rule involves recognising or using it as a rule. But we should not over-intellectualise what that requires.

Here is an example. English has the saying: “Cometh the hour, cometh the man”. That saying is sometimes adapted to fit other contexts. I once came across this instance: “Cometh the hour, cometh the caring people of Chicago”. My immediate reaction was that that was wrong; you cannot say “cometh the caring people Chicago”. I could not articulate exactly why it was wrong; but I knew that it was. Later, I worked out why it is wrong. “Cometh” is the (archaic) third-person singular of “come”: I come, thou comest, he/she/it cometh. The third-person plural is “come”. So you can say “Cometh the hour, come the caring people of Chicago”; you can not say “Cometh the hour, cometh the caring people of Chicago”. But even before I could explicitly articulate the rule for “cometh”, I had grasped that rule and was following it. I was not just acting in a regular way. On the contrary; I treated “cometh” as grammatically *correct* in the third-person singular and *incorrect* in the third-person plural.

Similarly, when someone plays chess, she follows the rules of chess. She may not be able to *state* the rules accurately – or even at

all. But she must be able to make judgements like these: you *can't* move the bishop like that; you're only *allowed* to move it like this; you *have to* move the pawn to the last square before you *can* have a Queen; if you move your pawn like that, I'm *allowed* to take it like this. Such a player is not merely moving the pieces on the board in a regular way: a way that accords with the rules. She *treats* or *uses* the rules as rules. And, on Wittgenstein's view, that is enough for her to be *following* those rules.

4.1 “Our Grammar is Lacking in [...] Perspicuity” (PI, § 122)

On the view just sketched, following a rule involves treating it as a rule. But you can only treat something as a rule if you know that it is a rule. So following rules, as opposed to merely conforming to them, requires knowing the rules you are following. Glüer and Wikforss object that such a view of linguistic rules is incompatible with Wittgenstein's other commitments. Their reasoning is this. If using a language involves treating its rules as rules, we must know the rules of our language; otherwise we could not treat them as rules. But Wittgenstein says repeatedly that the grammar of our language is not perspicuous. And to say that is to say that we *do not* know the grammatical rules that govern our language. So the current view of rule-following conflicts with Wittgenstein's insistence that we often misunderstand the grammar of our own language.⁹

However, there is no tension here – provided we avoid over-intellectualising what it takes to be following linguistic rules. A central insight in Wittgenstein's later work is that even though we have a practical grasp of the use of our language, we often have no reflective understanding of that use. For instance, we have a practical grasp of our language for talking about time and of the procedures for measuring time. But we lack a reflective, philosophical understanding of the grammar of that language: that is why we are easily puzzled by the question, ‘What is time?’; and it is why we can get into the position of wondering how it is so much as possible to measure time.¹⁰ Now what does it take to have a practical grasp of our language? It is not enough that we merely apply words in regular ways: ways that conform to the grammatical rules of our language. Having a practical grasp of our language also includes being able to recognise what does and does not make sense; to identify this use as *right* and that as *wrong*; to recognise that you *can* say this and *cannot* say that. Someone who can do

⁹ For this argument, see Glüer, Wikforss (2010, 157-9).

¹⁰ See Wittgenstein's comments about time at PI, §§ 89-90 and about the measurement of time at BB, 26.

all that is not just conforming to the rules that govern their language; they are following the rules. But following the rules, understood in that way, is perfectly compatible with being unable to give a reflective account of those rules. That is Wittgenstein's point.

4.2 Crispin Wright and Basic Rule-Following

Finally, we should consider Glüer and Wikforss's discussion of the account of rule-following developed in Crispin Wright's later work on that topic. Glüer and Wikforss think that Wright's account obliterates the distinction between following a rule and merely conforming to a rule. But Wright highlights a feature of rule-following that is clearly important in Wittgenstein's treatment. Is there a problem, here, for the “received view”?

Wright draws attention to passages like PI, § 219:

When I follow the rule, I do not choose. I follow the rule *blindly*.

At the basic level, as Wright puts it, we can give no reason for following a rule in the way we do. And the message of Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following, he thinks, is that

All rule-following involves basic rule-following. And basic – ‘blind’ – rule-following, properly understood, is rule-following without reason. (Wright 2007, 497)

Glüer and Wikforss argue that, if we accept that account of rule-following, we lose the distinction between following a rule and merely conforming to the rule. Intuitively, they think (and I agree), following a rule involves treating the rule as a reason for acting as one does. But on Wright's account, we have no reason at the basic level for following any rule in the way we do. Applying that to the case of language gives the view that we use words in regular ways but, at the basic level, have no reason for using them as we do. So, Glüer and Wikforss conclude, if we accept the view of rules that Wright derives from Wittgenstein, we must give up the idea that using language involves following rules.

As before, I do not think this is a telling criticism of the “received view” that using language involves following rules. The point about basic rule-following that Wright takes from Wittgenstein needs handling with care. Properly understood, I shall argue, there is no conflict between Wittgenstein's observation that the application of a familiar rule is “blind” and the idea that, when someone is following a rule as opposed to merely acting in accord with the rule, the rule is involved in her reasons for acting as she does.

We have already quoted PI, § 219. Here are two other relevant passages from *Philosophical Investigations*:

“No matter how you instruct him in continuing the ornamental pattern, how can he *know* how he is to continue it by himself?” – Well, how do *I* know?—If that means “Have I reasons?”, the answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons. (PI, § 211)

“How am I able to follow 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 bed-rock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do”. (PI, § 217)

Now consider a familiar case. I am writing down a series of numbers, following the rule ‘add 2 each time’. I write down “996, 998, 1000, 1002”. A conversation ensues:

Q: What reason do you have for writing “1002” after “1000”?

A: I’m following the ‘add 2’ rule and the rule requires me to put “1002” at this point.

Q: But what reason do you have for thinking that “1002” is what the ‘add 2’ rule requires you to put at this point?

A: Well, following the ‘add 2’ rule requires you to put “2, 4, 6, 8, 10...” and to go on doing the same thing at each successive step. Putting “1002” after “1000” is doing the same thing as that.

Q: But what reason do you have for thinking that putting “1002” after “1000” is doing the same thing as that?

A: It just is. Putting “1002” after “1000” just is what counts as doing the same thing as before.

What should we say about my reasons in this case? The position is this. In the first place, I did have a reason for continuing the series in the way I did: my reason was that the ‘add 2’ rule requires putting “1002” after “1000”. Furthermore, I could give some reasons for thinking that that is what the ‘add 2’ rule requires. Those reasons ‘soon gave out’. At that point, I wrote “1002” without having any further reasons *for thinking that that’s what the add 2 rule requires at that point*. In that sense, I acted “without reasons”. But that does not mean that, in writing “1002”, I had no reasons *for doing what I did*. On the contrary, I did have a reason for writing “1002”; namely, that “1002” was what the ‘add 2’ rule requires one to put after “1000”.

Glüer and Wikforss worry that, if we accept that basic rule-following is “blind”, we lose the distinction between following a rule and merely acting in accord with a rule. But the points just made give us an answer to that worry. We can imagine a parrot or a machine

making noises that conform to the rule ‘add 2’ without understanding what it is doing. It makes the sounds “2, 4, 6, 8.... 996, 998, 1000, 1002” and so on. But it has no sense that “1002” is the right way to continue the series and that “1004” would be wrong: it has no reason for putting “1002” after “1000”; it is not trying to follow the rule ‘add 2’; indeed, it has no idea that there is such a thing as the rule ‘add 2’, or that there are such things as rules at all. In short, the parrot or the machine is making sounds that conform to the rule ‘add 2’; but it is not following the rule. Contrast the parrot or the machine with me. When I write “1002” after “1000”, I am trying to follow the rule ‘add 2’ and, as we have seen, I do have a reason for putting “1002”: namely, that that is what the rule requires at this point. That is the difference between me and the parrot or the machine. And it is entirely consistent with Wittgenstein’s point that my reasons for thinking that the ‘add 2’ rule requires acting in *this* way at this point ‘soon give out’.

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