

A Woman May Intuit, But a Gentlemen Follows Rules:

Why Wittgenstein Insists Interpretation Cannot Determine Meaning.

Camiante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar. -Antonio Machado

While Ludwig Wittgenstein and his Interlocutor are examining language games in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, the question soon arises of how a pupil is to assuredly know he understands the association between a particular sign/symbol/formulae/word and *a meaning*. For the pupil to be able to naturally go on using a sign in the correctly established manner, the pupil must understand what the sign means. The execution of this relationship is a very natural process in reality, but a complex language game to consider philosophically. Wittgenstein asserts that the meaning behind a sign is simply its customary usage; this established usage then becomes the normative model for the pupil to follow either correctly (ideally) or incorrectly (which Wittgenstein readily confesses is a puzzling event in itself). The pupil must utilize certain rules each time he makes a decision of how to use the sign if he is to use it correctly. This rule-guided use, in turn, determines meaning. However, the pupil's *interpretation* of how the rules are to be used or of the sign itself, when he interacts with a given sign, *can in no way determine the sign's meaning*.

The purpose of my paper, then is to show why the following holds true: Wittgenstein does not believe interpretations can determine meaning. To prove this, my paper will begin by quickly summarizing Wittgenstein's understanding of a concept. In particular I will take care to demonstrate why Wittgenstein believes concepts function in different contexts (or games) according to rules which may or may not have clearly

defined boundaries. If these rules are not able to be understood correctly, there may be a point in time where the process of further learning becomes impossible. Following this, I will explain what Wittgenstein feels constitutes a game; to do so I will first explain how games are related to one another viz. affinities which Wittgenstein dubs *family resemblances*. Next, I will provide and analyze an example of a language game found within the *Investigations*. Following this explication, I will briefly summarize the necessary conditions Wittgenstein insists *must exist* for communication to be able to take place between two individuals. In doing so, I hope to illustrate what a Wittgensteinian language game looks like in practice. After this quick summary, I will analyze Wittgenstein's discussion of how a concept is to be used, and how this use in turn determines meaning. In doing so I will show that interpretations or intuitions, which may possibly be correct, can in no way facilitate the defining or application of a concept.

Wittgenstein's interlocutor poses a potential definition for meaning very early on, concluding,

Right; so in your view the concept of number is explained as the logical sum of those individual interrelated concepts: cardinal numbers, rational numbers, real numbers and so forth (*Philosophical Investigations*, §68).

These individual concepts need not be layered in single units though, because,

“I [Wittgenstein] *can* give the concept of number rigid boundaries in this way, that is, use the word “number” for a rigidly bounded concept; but I can also use it so that the extension of the concept is *not* closed by a boundary” (§68).

Though a concept's use can be (and very often *may* be) defined by a rigid set of boundaries, there is no reason this need be so. Though the rules of a game concerning an algebraic formula may rigidly prescribe how one is to act (understand) in order to make a

calculation at any given point, a game such as “catch” can just as easily exist with no rules prescribed at all; the rules can easily be “blurred” (§71). Wittgenstein asks the interlocutor “Is it senseless to say ‘Stay roughly here.’” (§71). In this scenario only a vague gesture is made to explain how to understand the concept (and thus follow the order) “ Stay roughly here”. Consider an example consisting of an interplay between a colonel and a subordinate. If a colonel in the U.S. Army tells a subordinate to “stand roughly here,” regardless of the potential for confusion his order may contain, the colonel will certainly expect a response in tune with his loosely-defined order. This example of teaching highlights an essential function of teaching; namely, that in education (or training as Wittgenstein calls it) examples of how to follow concepts are given, and then rules governing these concepts are meant to be followed when using a concept *at every new decision*. The rules thus, be them clearly or loosely prescribed, dictate how a sign is to be used. Wittgenstein then compares the method of teaching inherent in following orders to how,

...one might explain what a game is. One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way. - I do not mean by this expression however, that he is supposed to see in those examples that common feature which I - for some reason - was unable to formulate, but that he is now to employ those examples in a particular way. Here giving examples is not an *indirect* way of explaining - in default of a better one. (*Philosophical Investigations*, §71)

Imagine the following example: Socrates gives picture examples to Theaetetus. These pictures are meant to be understood in particular contexts, which Socrates calls a *game*. In this game, the prescribed rules and examples lead Theaetetus (if he wishes to respond correctly) to act in accordance with what rules and boundaries Socrates has prescribed. All the indirect connotations of the association between the concept, the example, and the rules are simultaneously present (which *could* allow for indirect teaching), but, as rules

and boundaries are apparent insofar as they are prescribed, they are what is *literally* meant to be followed.

Let us now consider what, “activities that we call ‘games’. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, athletic games, and so on What is common to them all?” (§66). It is urgent we fight our natural tendency to assume what is common to all is the, “disjunction of all their common properties,” lest we descend down a path which will lead us into error and confusion. Clearly, calling the “relation between many similar games” the “concept which is the relation between many similar games” does not progress our investigation. Otherwise, we might as well say, “There is Something that runs through the whole thread-namely, the continuous overlapping of these fibres” (§67). What then, do all the games listed above have in common? Wittgenstein insists there is no *one* thing which they can say to have in common, “For if you look at them, you won’t see something that is common to all, but similarities, affinities, and a whole series of them at that,” (§66). The question then becomes: What then are these affinities?

Wittgenstein answers that he,

“can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’ ; for the various resemblances between members of a family - build, features, colour of eyes, gait...overlap and criss-cross in the same way. - And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family” (§66).

Thus, though the many phenomena of games may have no one thing in common “in virtue of which we use the same word for all,” there still are a number of similarities between them, and these similarities constitute ‘families’. Of these affinities, the “games” form a family insofar as all instances of playing a game shares in having these criss-crossing, amorphous similarities. Likewise, language forms a family. Orders, questions, and assertions all share these intermingling affinities; hence, we associate them

all as functions of language.

Now that I have provided a preliminary understanding of what Wittgenstein means by game and language, it is time to turn to language games. Language games can be most simply defined as situations where our simultaneous use of language and actions can be seen to share familial affinities with similar situations of a different contextual kind. This simple definition will now be explicated.

“Let’s now examine the following kind of language-game: when A gives an order, B has to write down series of signs according to a certain formation rule,” (§143). This will be the example of a language game focused on to elucidate how to think of a language game, as well as to illustrate what Wittgenstein considers a language game to be. Also, we will use this example to highlight the necessary circumstances for communication to take place between two individuals. To summarize: when A orders, B writes.

Let the first of the series [which B is to write] be that of the natural numbers in the decimal system. - How does he come to understand the system? First of all, series of numbers are written down for him, and he is required to copy them...And here already there is a normal and an abnormal learner’s reaction.- At first, perhaps, we guide his hand in writing out the series 0 to 9; but then the *possibility of communication* will depend on his going on to write it down by himself, (§143).

Necessarily, for communication to sustain itself B must *understand* A. If B were to continue writing the series and make some form of a *mistake*, then communication ceases. As Wittgenstein envisions the game happening, “he does copy the figures by himself, but not in the right order: he writes sometimes one, sometimes another, at random. And at *that* point communication stops.” (§143). If A orders B to write the number ‘7’ and B writes ‘5’ then no proper communication can be said to have taken

place; there is no regularity between the given order and the executed event if the order is misunderstood, and thus used incorrectly. Thus, if one party does not understand the regularity governing the words, the possibility for communication is not present. It is also important for us to not think *some* communication has taken place, but that it has simply been confounded. A distinction between *language* and *communication* may serve to make this point less obscured.

(Example of Communication: Socrates asks Theaetetus to grab him the yellow canary out of his birdcage; rather than grab the red cardinal, Theaetetus grabs the yellow canary. Example of Language: An infant babbles and coos.)

Wittgenstein urges us to, “Notice, however, that there is no sharp distinction between a random and a systematic mistake. That is, between what you are inclined to call a ‘random’ and what a ‘systematic’ one.” (§143). In both cases, the pupil misuses whatever rule may be governing a concept, and thus cannot be said to be communicating. As no *communication* can take place, the only possible recourse to would be *further training*.

This further training has no guarantee of fecundity, however. Wittgenstein comments on how training would progress after these setbacks had been noticed and (potentially) addressed, saying, “Perhaps it is possible to wean him from the systematic mistake... Or perhaps one accepts his way of copying and tries to teach him the normal one as an offshoot. And here too, our pupil’s ability to learn may come to an end,” (§143). This is not a matter of content, but a matter of form. “What Do I mean when I say ‘the pupil’s ability to learn *may* come to an end,’” Wittgenstein asks, “Do I report this from my own experience? Of course not,” (§144). This is not an empirical claim; rather,

Wittgenstein simply wants the reader to put a picture before his mind of such a circumstance, to picture what it would look like for someone to be unable to see the family resemblance within a series. To make this point clear, Wittgenstein adjusts the game again. “Suppose the pupil now writes the series 0 to 9 to our satisfaction... Now I continue to guide him through the series and draw his attention to the recurrence of the first series in the units; and then to its recurrence in the tens.” Then, Wittgenstein says, the pupil has the ability to continue the series on his own, or he does not. The interlocutor, enraged by this flippant philosophizing, exclaims, “But why do you say that? *That* much is obvious!” (§145). Wittgenstein agrees, and then clarifies; “Of course; I only wished to say: the effect of any further *explanation* depends on his *reaction*,” (§145). Again, communication depends on both parties understanding how to correctly react at any given moment to a sign. If the pupil does not understand, or cannot adduce how he is *to understand*, then communication ends, and the possibility of learning ends with it.

In §185 Wittgenstein draws a similarity between a student who finds it natural to, “continue one series (say ‘+2’) beyond 1000--and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012,” and one to whom “it comes naturally...to react to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction from fingertip to wrist, rather than from wrist to fingertip,” (*Philosophical Investigations*). The important similarity between these two misguided individuals is that each misuses the expression provided to them. If Socrates wants Theaetetus to see the Elysian Parade progressing through the streets, Socrates may, following custom, point with his index finger to the parade in hopes of diverting Theaetetus’ attention to it. Theaetetus, however, may be unfamiliar with the local

customs regarding index fingers; as such, he may not know how to correctly use the tool Socrates is trying to provide him (namely, a hand gesture meant to reallocate Theaetetus' current focus). Should Theaetetus not know how he is to use Socrates' expression (hand gesture) he may draw any conclusion he finds natural. Sometimes, this conclusion is at odds with how the expression (symbol, formulae, etc.) is intended to be used; in this case, meaning is lost.

This logically holds true if one remembers that, for Wittgenstein, meaning is use. So, if rules dictate how we use a word, rules indirectly dictate meaning insofar as the rule dictates how the sign, formula, or word is to be understood and used. Thus, if an individual does not know the rules which dictate how a symbol is to be understood, he may use it any number of conceivable, though incorrect, ways as he lacks the foundation to use the symbol correctly. To reiterate, Wittgenstein believes this foundation is custom.

Wittgenstein's interlocutor, fresh with the image of a helpless student drawing incorrect conclusions from a formula then concludes, "What you are saying, then, comes to this: a new insight -- intuition is needed at every step to carry out the order '+n' correctly," (*Philosophical Investigations* § 186). Wittgenstein quickly begins to attack this claim, asking "How is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular point?...Or again, what at any stage we are to call 'being in accordance with it,'" (*Philosophical Investigations*, §186). A new intuition cannot be what is needed at every step for an individual to correctly identifies the rules, and consequential use, associated with a symbol as G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker note in their commentary *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity* because, "Intuition presupposes an independent determination of correctness; it is not one's intuition that makes doing thus-and-so

correct, rather one intuits that the correct thing to do is thus-and-so” (68). If the individual (the one being examined to determine his mastery of an equation, mentioned above) has nothing to rely on when faced with a sign than intuition, than any conclusion drawn is equivalent to guessing the correct use; thus, “intuiting presupposes precisely that which is here perplexing (how the meaning is to be known)” (Baker and Hacker, Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity, 69).

How, then, can one correctly use a sign? Or, as Wittgenstein asks, “How is this expression used?” (Philosophical Investigations, §189). To answer this question, Wittgenstein mentions people who are “so trained that they all take the same step at the same point when they receive the order ‘+3’....’ For these people the order ‘+3’ completely determines every step from one number to the next” (Philosophical Investigations §189). These kinds of individuals know the rules associated with the order, and thus know the meaning of their actions; these people are to be distinguished from those who do not understand, which is typified by “not know[ing] what they are to do on receiving this order, or who react to it with perfect certainty, but each one in a different way” (Philosophical Investigations, §189). Both these latter examples clearly do not know the rules governing the use of the symbols, so both draw incorrect, or no, conclusions about the symbol’s meaning.

In § 196 Wittgenstein. claims that when one misunderstands the use of the word, one takes understanding to “signify an odd process. (As one thinks of time as a strange medium, of the mind as an odd kind of being” (*Philosophical Investigations*). “Odd” in this sense is meant to be understood as a purely mental faculty (such as noumena, time, the soul, or mind). This claim too supports that Wittgenstein does not think interpretation

can dictate meaning; as Baker and Hacker comment, “to conceive of grasping the use of a word, of understanding, as a mental process is a disastrous error,” (Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar, and Necessity, 128). Interpretation at its relative root (which is grounded in the *experience* of perceiving a sign) can in no way determine that which it perceives; likewise the interpretation can in no way determine the sign’s meaning.

Luckily, Wittgenstein provides an analogy in §197 which clears up our current dilemma. This analogy, as Baker and Hacker note, also helps pave the way for Wittgenstein’s ensuing discussion of rule-following’s role in determining meaning. Wittgenstein claims that, “It’s as if we could grasp the whole use of a word at a stroke,” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §197). In and of itself, there is nothing strange in this statement; it becomes strange, however, when one’s mind is seduced into thinking that understanding a symbol necessarily entails knowing all the future applications of the symbol in a strange, mystical way. To show why this confusion happens (as well as to prove that symbols do not contain all their future applications) Wittgenstein analogizes “understanding at a stroke” with “intending to play chess (Baker and Hacker, Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar, and Necessity, 129).

This analogy is, as philosopher’s are wont to say, *very difficult to understand*. Nonetheless, with the foundations of analytic philosophy at stake, it is a task that will be undertaken for the sake of clarity.

There are two sentences Wittgenstein writes to make the analogy clear The first is: “there isn’t any doubt that we understand the word, and on the other hand that its meaning lies in its use,” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §197). The second: “There is no doubt that I now want to play chess, but chess is the game it is in virtue of all its rules”

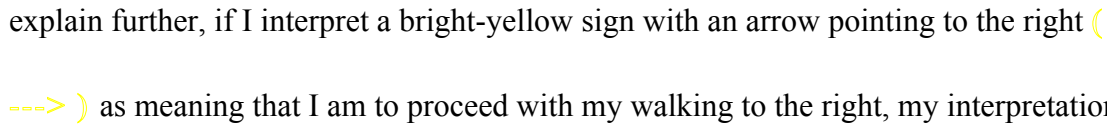
(*Philosophical Investigations*, §197). To paraphrase the first sentence: “I understand the word = I understand the meaning = I understand the use= I understand how the rules are to be used”. For the second: “I understand I intend to play chess = I understand I want to play the game which has all the rules of chess”. Thus: If Socrates *understands* the meaning of a word at a stroke like he *intends* to play the game of chess, he must necessarily know the rules (however rigid, loose, or unspoken) which govern the usage of the word *in the same manner* which he knows the rules which govern the game of chess.

I hope this is now sufficiently clear.

As noted above, Wittgenstein does not infer there is anything strange at all in this until one begins to think that “the present ‘act of understanding’ must contain all future applications of the word,” (Baker and Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar, and Necessity*, 129). Wittgenstein calls it nonsense to think that he would have to be actively engaging in the rules of chess to know that the rules which govern the game called chess is in fact the game he wants to play. Wittgenstein writes, concluding remark 197, “What is the connection [between]...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 it.” (*Philosophical Investigations*). The rules of the game of chess prescribe how the game of chess is to be played (and thus what it is to play a game of chess), so it makes perfect sense that the connection between the game itself and the command to play it (“Let’s play a game of chess”) are connected by no more than the list of rules (which the game literally is in this instance) the teaching of it (which illustrate how the rules of the game are to be understood in such a context) and, of course, the everyday practice of the game, the last of which reaffirms itself every time an individual chooses to follow

play the game by following its rules.

As Wittgenstein has now established why it is that rules determine how one understands and uses a word (and thus also determines a word's meaning) Wittgenstein turns to illustrating how it is a rule is meant to aid one's actions according to the prescribed rules. In §198, Wittgenstein's always pesky interlocutor proclaims, "But how can a rule teach me what I have to do at this point? After all, whatever I do can, on some interpretation, be made compatible with the rule," (*Philosophical Investigations*).

Wittgenstein wastes no time formulating his refutation. After simply noting that the interlocutor should not speak as such, Wittgenstein says, "Every interpretation hangs in the air together with what it interprets and cannot give it any support" (§198). To explain further, if I interpret a bright-yellow sign with an arrow pointing to the right () as meaning that I am to proceed with my walking to the right, my interpretation does not at all influence what the sign says. The sign itself espouses nothing more than what it is, namely an arrow pointing to the right. Wittgenstein does not believe the connection between the sign and my actions lies in my interpretation of what the sign could possibly mean. Instead, he suggests that I *understand* the sign as meaning I am to go right because I have been trained to simply go right when a sign I am using suggests it to me. As Wittgenstein himself says at the end of §198,

What sort of connection obtains here – Well this one...I have been trained to react in a particular way to this sign, and now I do so react to it...I have further indicated that a person goes by a signpost [word, symbol, or sign] only in so far as there is an established usage, a custom.

Without proper training and contextual circumstance, the sign means nothing. However, if an individual has been trained to react to a symbol's use in a particular context then they should be able to yield a "correct interpretation" of the symbol. At this point, I will

note that I do not think Wittgenstein would refer to an individual's reaction to a symbol's use in a particular context as a "correct interpretation" though there is no reason he could not. Rather, I feel Wittgensteinian language would more closely resemble calling the phenomena a "customary action" or, "following a rule". But the point is moot as far as this paper is concerned.

With everything I have said now established, I will take a moment to summarize my position; then, I will make clear how my paper is to show how interpretation cannot determine meaning. As I have said: Wittgenstein feels that the meaning of a sign is determined by use. The use of a sign is customary, and is determined in part by rules which may or may not be clearly defined. These rules are communicated to an individual via training, which may or may not be understood. If the intended use of a sign is conveyed, then communication is said to have taken place, and the pupil has understood. The rules, which the pupil understands, teach the pupil what choice to make at any step, so the steps and future possibilities of the concept need not be contained in them.

With this established, I will now prove that interpretations cannot determine meaning as it does not fulfill any of the requirements which meaning is contingent on (namely use, which is determined in part by rules).

In §199, Wittgenstein poses the question, "Is what we call 'following a rule' something that it would be possible for only one person, only once in a lifetime, to do?" (*Philosophical Investigations*). Wittgenstein's conclusion: No. As he noted in §198, people respond to signs in so far as there is an established custom. Thus, if an association is to be made between rule and a course of action (or a symbol and a relevant or correct interpretation) it must be made multiple times by multiple people. This way, each person

has a standard of measure by which to assess their actions or interpretation. Wittgenstein then notes at the end of §199 that, “To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to have mastered a technique,” (*Philosophical Investigations*). The word “technique” here also suggests that the technique is a definitely governed set of actions, and that it is equally imaginable that someone goes against the technique. This discussion of techniques segues directly into remark 200, where Wittgenstein reconfirms that games must have a customary point of ascription to be valid.

In §200 Wittgenstein proposes a language game wherein two individuals of a tribe unacquainted with chess, “sit at a chessboard and go through the moves of a game of chess...if we were to see it, we’d say that they were playing chess,”. At this point, all is well. Next, Wittgenstein asks the reader to imagine that the game was translated into a system of rules and actions that are not typically associated with games. In his example, Wittgenstein says that the rules and actions of chess are replaced with, “yells and stamping of feet,” (*Philosophical Investigations*). Wittgenstein then asks: if these actions are translatable into suitable rules for a game of chess would we say that they are playing chess? and with what right do we do so? (*Philosophical Investigations*). I myself am inclined to say that we (Wittgenstein, myself, and all others who espouse our knowledge of chess’ rules through our competent game play) would not say that they are playing chess. Customarily, the game of chess is not played with yells and feet stampings (though yelling and stamping of feet may be a result of a chess game). This being the case, I believe Wittgenstein would say of the tribe the same thing he says of interpretation: as interpretation does not determine meaning, so too an interpretation into uncustomary

rules does not determine a game. I also believe Wittgenstein would not view the tribesmen's actions as a game because of what as he says in the very next remark, "if every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule, then it can also be brought into conflict with it," (*Philosophic Investigations*, §198). The tribesmen, while they have the ability to view their yelling and feet stamping as being aligned with the rules of chess, could equally (or perhaps even more easily) perceive the yelling and stamping of feet as something that does not bring to mind the rules or game play of chess in the least.

Wittgenstein next seeks to further meditate on the false analogy between "following a rule" and "interpreting a sign" (*Philosophic Investigations*, §201). If a person interprets a sign in a manner that does not follow the sign's established custom, then the interpretation is not said to be correct or valid (which isn't a particularly fecund way to view following a rule, regardless). This holds true because, as Wittgenstein noted earlier, if the interpretation can be brought into accord with what it interprets without any established use of the symbol, then the interpretation must also have the capacity to be brought into equal disagreement with the object or sign it interprets. Phrased otherwise, if one interpretation can be said to objectively determine meaning, there is no standard of measure by which all other interpretations can be reconciled; instead all interpretations, even self-contradictory ones, would be valid.

After Wittgenstein finally finishes explaining the difference between what he feels constitutes an "interpretation" from the "interpretations" people are normally seduced into subjectively making, he notes another distinction among these two kinds of "interpretations". To draw this distinction, he discusses what both kinds of interpretation

look like in practice. “That’s why”, he begins in §202, “‘following a rule is a practice’.
 And to think one is following a rule is not to follow a rule. And that’s why it’s not possible to follow a rule privately; otherwise thinking one was following a rule would be the same thing as following it,”(*Philosophical Investigations*). If a person felt that interpreting in their mind the meaning of a rule in some way was a form of addressing/following it, the person would never have to abide by the rule in reality in order to be reconciled with it. There is no choice being made, nothing be followed, only something being subjectively imagined. This certainly does not resemble following a rule. To analogize this with Wittgenstein’s previous assertions on interpretation: to subjectively interpret something inwardly is not to follow the rule of the symbol as one is foregoing the use of the sign to instead assert something they themselves have subjectively determined *about* the sign. The interpretation does not speak to what the sign is or what it means, but what it *could possibly be otherwise*. Thus, interpretations can in no way determine meaning.

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* posit that we examine the way in which we understand and communicate with one another in a way which does not presuppose a set system of meaning. As such, a concept’s meaning is governed by its use. How a concept is to be used is determined by the rules which accompany its use, rules which may or may not be clearly defined. Regardless, as meaning is dictated by use it can in no way be determined by intuitions or interpretations. Intuitions and interpretations can correctly or incorrectly align with a concept’s meaning, but this alignment in no way lends credence or foundational validity to the concept’s meaning; it only speaks to it.

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