

Rule Following and the Normativity of Meaning

The paper begins from the assumption that linguistic meaning is normative and attempts to arrive at an understanding of its normative nature by revisiting Wittgenstein's thoughts on the topic, aided especially by Wright's and McDowell's writings, which often engage one another.

We've been made familiar, perhaps primarily by Kripke's discussion of the issue, with the fact that Wittgenstein raises a sceptical paradox about rule following. I argue on novel grounds that Wittgenstein does not subscribe to the sceptical position; quite the reverse: he devotes a good deal of patience and care in revealing the bases for discerning apparent rule following, and these demonstrate that there can be no apparent rule following in the absence of genuine rule following. So the sceptical position, which would have us dismiss all cases of apparent rule following as just that, as *merely* apparent, is incoherent. But dismissing scepticism is not to dismiss our genuine puzzlement about the nature of following a rule. In order to address this puzzle I turn to Wittgenstein's discussion of two themes: the sense in which a rule points beyond any finite sample of uses, beyond any explanation, to a pattern of use which extends to indefinitely many new cases; and the role of communal agreement in establishing a standard of correctness.

To be sure, the phenomenology of rule following appears to require a conception of rules as standards of correctness reaching ahead to situations yet to be encountered, as 'rails to infinity'. And that our understanding thus outruns anything we might do to manifest it and any explanation we might provide for a potential learner. But Wittgenstein, though acutely alive to these temptations, is strenuous in his warnings of deep confusions in the vicinity. For such a conception of rules requires that a competent speaker has internalised the rule in some fashion; but we have no model of what this might consist in, except in terms of grasp of an interpretation. However the very idea that participation in a normative practice is underwritten by grasp of a set of interpretations is at the core of the rule following paradox. Instead we need to see the undoubted phenomena surrounding the following of a rule in deflationary terms: as indicating that no finite set of uses exhausts the rule's gamut; no explanation is proof against misunderstanding; that in following a rule we face no choice about how it is to be applied.

But if the Platonistic conception of rules must be dismissed as mythological; then we seem driven to locate the normative requirement in the practice itself. And now we feel the pull of consensualism, the idea that practitioners' agreement determines what is correct. Wittgenstein, however, warns us not to accept such a position either. Though agreement lies at the basis of the possibility of normative practice, we should not assimilate being correct with coinciding with others' judgements.

On Wright's view the target of Wittgenstein's attack is the notion that rule can impose investigation independent requirements on its user—that it is like a rail to infinity—and the attack is driven home by rejecting a conception of understanding as essentially private, which he takes to be a consequence of the view. McDowell demurs, arguing that investigation independence is of a piece with our conception of genuine normativity; Wright's view is thus not a restoration of an acceptable conception of ourselves as genuine rule-followers but a betrayal of such a view. Unsurprisingly, the most we can achieve on such a view is an ersatz notion of correctness as agreement with one's fellows.

It is clear that Wittgenstein thinks that locating rule following against the backdrop of custom and practice makes a crucial difference, but, though this step does throw into question elements of the dialectic—e.g., Kripke's distinctively first personal mode of framing the sceptic's question—it is not clear where its crucial impact lies. To gain clarity here we need to view the backdrop of a communal practice against Wittgenstein's observations that justifications come to an end. The upshot of this position is that the sceptic errs by continually searching for justifications for use; instead we can discern rule-governed use by focusing on use within a communal practice. The role that the community plays here and, correlatively, the confusion underlying the concept of a solitary speaker, is that induction into such a practice is based on training, which, in turn, requires manifestation of one's capacities to competent practitioners. Thus the solitary speaker cannot induct herself into a practice. Essential elements of this argument are the twin claims that: (i) persistence of a policing practice—a practice of adjudicating whether uses are correct or not—is itself a guarantor of genuine rule following (this argument is alluded to above in rejecting the sceptical solution); and (ii) a solitary linguist cannot maintain a policing practice.

In attempting to explain rule following in the context of an end to justifications, I echo McDowell's writings in making heavy use of Wittgenstein's remarks about measuring. The upshot of those remarks is that practices are in a certain sense self-standing. For there is no approach to the phenomena our practice aims to portray but through the practice itself (or an analogue). What sustains the practice of measuring is a 'constancy in measurement' not portraying the world as it is; but the results of measurement do not state that constancy. But couldn't there be a question about the ultimate legitimacy of a practice? No, because Wittgenstein thinks that following a rule is to possess a certain technique; there can be no answering a question about the rule's correct employment but by employment of the technique. So all questions about the requirements of a rule are to be tackled within the relevant normative practice and there can be no question about the legitimacy of the practice itself.