

Lecture 4; Rule Following (Secs. 138 (?) – 242)

1. Discussion of W's approach to rule following received its greatest stimulus with the publication of Kripke's book *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* in 1982.

According to K, W aimed to support a non-individualist account of understanding rules (and language) and also to support an anti-realist account of understanding, as the ways out of a paradox about interpretation. These are big theses, and the brilliance of K's exposition resulted in massive discussion of K's account. K's arguments are highly important, - indeed, anyone grappling with W must read K's book - but I want to concentrate on W's text, to determine a proper critical reading.

2. It is not entirely clear where we should count the rule-following sections as starting – but I shall start at 138. In my initial discussion I shall consider the first two parts of W's discussion; the first part runs to 155, and then W discusses reading 156 – 178.

there are some basic themes – problems and conjectures - which emerge in these two first parts which it is good to highlight and discuss.

3. Meaning as Use.

W starts with a strange question in **138**; 'But can't the meaning of a word that I understand fit the sense of a sentence that I understand?' He then adds 'Of course, if the meaning is the use we make of the word, it makes no sense to speak of such 'fitting''. So the question starts from the idea of meaning as use – that frames the discussion (at this stage). But what does the initial question mean? What is supposed to be fitting what? Suggestion – when W talks of the sense of a sentence he means a definition – the sentence giving the definition has a sense – and cannot the meaning fit that definition?

The problem is supposed to be that since meaning is use a formula cannot fit the meaning. It is hard to understand this problem. We can perfectly well say – that

definition does not fit how he (seems to) use the term. So there is no obvious worry here. (If I say – he does not cut his lawn with that mower – and he does use that mower then my statement does not fit his use. Fitting use is something that a statement seems it can do.)

But in sec **139** the question seems to be – when I hear a word I understand it but if meaning is use how can that be? This is a question about what Grice calls occasion understanding. Now, W seems to have the same worry as before – how can use be present in an instance? One is inclined to say – the use cannot be present but what the use is can be given in an instance. So, in the absence of something more, there is no problem. The idea of meaning as use has not raised difficulties here.

W, however, considers the suggestion that a picture (or something like a picture) comes before the mind. But there are questions this development raises. 1] Why should W introduce this idea of pictures at this point? His previous discussion of meaning has in effect excluded the model of pictures before the mind as an account of understanding – why look again at this suggestion? 2] In presenting this model W focuses on the idea of something before *consciousness* – but again his previous discussion has been against that. The idea of what is in consciousness figures prominently in the subsequent discussion. What one might say in response to this is that W has already developed a view in which things coming before consciousness is not constitutive or essential to meaning. So, why does this kind of question recur? 3] However, we should also remember that pictures are ways of conveying uses – think of pictures on e.g. hand dryers – picture of hands in the right places – we learn from the pictures how to use the dryer. So the model of pictures as conveying uses is not absurd.

W's response to this is that a picture can suggest a use to us, but the picture considered as a picture does not fix a use.

Then he considers (**141**) the suggestion that as well as the picture there is what he calls a method of projection – another picture – indicating how the first picture is to be taken. But it is *obvious* that this proposal faces the same problem. The second picture can be present without it conveying something.

4. What needs stressing so far is that all that has really happened is that the model of understanding (in this case, occasion understanding) as grounded in pictures before the mind has received another criticism – but, oddly, the criticism is based on the assumed idea that meaning is use – which itself emerged in opposition to the idea of meaning as images already.

Note, W is quite happy to allow that the pictures before the mind are genuinely pictures of things – he is not reading his opponent as grounding content in non-content – the pictures are taken as *of* something. So – it is not a model of intentionality without intentionality. The quite correct point is, rather, that pictures do not fix a use – although they might suggest a use.

5. Now, in **141**, W seems to label the case where it would be normal for people to take the picture as indicating one the normal case – and so puts his point as – there are abnormal cases. But – somewhat oddly – he then (in **142**) takes this talk of normal and abnormal to lead to the idea that if what is normal weren't normal then our language games might lose their point. Since we allow that meaning is an externally determined feature – W's externalism – this we can allow in general – but it really only becomes interesting with detailed suggestions. What is odd here is that the notion of normal and abnormal that emerged in 141 is quite different from the one in 142.

6. Induction and Working out a series.

With that odd detour (or so it seems to me) W starts in **143** a new discussion. At this point W introduces a type of example that figures in his discussion – B is ordered to write down a series of signs (numerals) according to a certain rule. In a sense this the point that **rules** enter the discussion. Initially the example is simply writing down the ascending numbers in decimal notation – ‘1,2,3, ...etc.’ Rather than considering what can be said about this case, W focuses on the process of **teaching** someone the notation. Now, in **143** W points out that whether the learner learns is depends on how he/she reacts to the inputs provided for them by the teacher – and this may result in no learning or mistaken learning or proper understanding – in this it resembles the upshot of eg ostension, as earlier discussed. Now, W has an interesting approach to this possibility – in **144** he seems to say that recognising this as possible should be thought of as ‘a way of looking at things’. It is no exaggeration to say that W regards modal language as requiring a special treatment. (He does no explain why.) In **145** he points out that we cannot state a limit of how much to test before we conclude that the learner has understood or grasped the rule or system.

But how should we think of this issue? The natural way is that we are making an *inductive* inference from what is necessarily limited data. As we might say – we have tested the learner in various cases and so we conclude that he has got the rule. This is simply like concluding something general from a restricted range of cases. Of course there is no number of cases that is conclusive. In fact, it is not quite like this – the learner can be asked to explain the system to us in general terms. This is more evidence. This way of thinking seems perfectly acceptable.

In 146 W stresses that the application – by which he means the steps the subject takes – is a *criterion* of understanding. Two comments – 1] there is an element of exaggeration here – we might well allow that someone understands a rule for a

sequence even if they make mistakes – they may make mistakes in working out the perfectly understood rule. 2] What does W mean when he calls this a criterion? That is a technical term in his philosophical vocabulary the significance of which is not obvious – nor has it really been explained. What does W mean by it?

There is evidence that W is opposed to this resolution of the difficulty – see **209 210** – and also 213. The crucial question is; does W show that it is wrong?

7. At this point W develops the discussion in ways which are hard to follow. He asks in **148** whether the general knowledge is something that the subject has at all times. But the answer is; yes – until he loses it. He then objects to calling the general knowledge a disposition (**149**) – the reason is that there should be two criteria for a disposition – what the thing does but also how it is constructed. But this reasoning seems dubious – often we ascribe powers or dispositions in the light solely of what something does – so that is not a problem – second, we are not restricted to what the subject does by way of writing down the series – the subject can provide us with other data. Then W has his attention caught by the fact that the subject can suddenly say – now I understand or know! And he asks what happens to prompt this exclamation. He notes that actually a variety of things might have gone on in the mind of the subject. Now, W seems concerned to deny that these occurrences ARE the understanding – first, they need not occur, second, they could occur without understanding. On this two comments – first, W has returned to an interest in what might be called occurrences in consciousness – and we would hardly think that they ARE the understanding or knowledge anyway; second, he tends to re-describe the occurrences in terms of formulae – and then his point is that it depends on what the formula means. Why does W do that?

8. Circumstantialism.

At this point what seems to be a proposal by W emerges – in these words – ‘If there is to be anything behind the utterance of the formula it is *particular circumstances* which justify me in saying I can go on’. (154) What is the significance of this proposal? It is hard to interpret this remark. For one thing, why is W now talking about *justification*? It has not been suggested until now that questions of what justifies claims were at issue. The focus has rather been on issues to do with what constitutes understanding – what it is. For another – what does W mean by the *circumstances*.

For all its unclarity and strangeness of focus W seems to be introducing here a notion of considerable importance to him – the notion of circumstances. See 155, and (in relation to reading) 164. W is dealing with cases with similar structures. Roughly – a subject S does something – say pronounces a word – or runs through a formula – the latter is inner, whereas the former is outer – call this performance X - and each performance is categorised as a G (for different G’s). W’s question is – what is it to be G? The answer he is – or seems to be - proposing is that X in itself is not G – nor is it G because of how it is brought about (or caused) – rather it is a G because in those circumstances an X is a G, whereas in other circumstances a Y might be a G, whereas in different circumstances an X would not be a G.

I call the suggestion that our notions conform to this pattern W’s **circumstantialism**. It needs to be asked; Is W really proposing this? Would it be a plausible proposal?

9. Finally, in 154 W recommends that we do not think of understanding as a mental process – ‘that is the expression which confuses you’. I feel like saying in response; what evidence is there that anyone has been tempted to think of understanding as a mental process? So how can that be what has been confusing us?

10. Reading; Secs 156 – 178.

W then devotes over 20 sections to reading – by which he means – reading the words out right – he is not including understanding. It is rather like sight-reading at music. He does so because it will make something clearer – and since the immediately preceding section concerns the role of circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that he intends the discussion of reading to clarify that. Now, if one were asked to give the question that is being raised it is – what is it to read? He is in effect trying to *define* reading. So one might *conjecture* that W's main point is that reading has to be treated in the circumstantialist way. W is keen to deny that reading is definable in terms of a certain occurrence in consciousness. This is his point is 156, 159 – 161, 169 – 178. There is no peculiar experience, not an experience of being guided. Further, when we classify someone as reading we are not alluding to a mechanism – 156, 158. Finally, W seems reluctant to accept that there is anything causal in the notion of reading. - 162. If this interpretation is correct then the crucial claim really comes in 164 – in the middle of the section – where he seems to apply his **circumstantialism** to reading. This reading may be wrong – but if it is what W is suggesting – and moreover going to suggest with understanding in general – including understanding mathematical rules – it faces a number of problems – 1] although it would be odd it is not clear that the ability to read must be taught. Maybe some creatures are just born with it. There need be nno circumstance of teaching for there to be reading. 2] To get the right sound in the right circumstances is not necessarily reading – it could be a fluke, or some strange causal set up. 3] There is a simpler account – maybe – the reader is able to recognise the sounds linked to the words and can say them. Usually this ability to recognise comes with training – ie teaching, but it need not. This recognitional ability is not exhausted in what the reader actually does – it is very general ability.

11. In 179/180 W returns to knowing how to go on and understanding generally. He floats the interesting idea that when the subject says ‘I can go on’ he is not so much describing the situation as offering a signal. This is one outbreak of expressivism in W’s discussion.

12. Rules, understanding, numbers and interpretations.

In 185 and following W is grappling again with series of numbers. He points out again that the learner can go wrong; we have seen how we should think about that – and it seems to cause no problems. But in 186 a new level of problem emerges – W asks; how is it decided what is the right step to take? But why is that a problem? Is W inclined to wonder whether there is a right step? Clearly – the indicated step is to – say – add 2. Why is there a difficulty about that? As to knowing what n plus 2 is – we calculate it. The chief problem with W’s discussion at this stage is that it is very hard to keep a grasp on the problem. A question that arises here – and hangs over the whole passage is; *why consider rules* – like – add 2 to every number? Surely if ‘add 2’ said in relation to a particular number is not a problem – and that need not be because the speaker has already made the calculation – why does – add 2 to every number – create a problem? So why the big deal about rules?

Clearly W is right to point out that the right result is not one that the person who understands ‘add 2’ has already laid down – but whoever thought that?

It becomes clear in **192** that W’s idea is that there is a tendency to analyse ‘understanding plus 2’ in a way that involves what he calls a SUPERLATIVE FACT.

It remains completely opaque what W envisages the superlative fact as.

In **198** W introduces one version of the famous paradox – see 201 – which centres on the talk of what ever I do is – on some interpretation – in accord with the rule. He says – ‘interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning’.

Now, the claim that anything that someone does is in accordance with the rule on some interpretation is just the claim that the word – say, add 2 – can be assigned an interpretation in accordance with what happens. So, for example, ‘add 2’ can be interpreted to mean – using our language – add 2 up to 1000 and then add 4 after that. and as far as I can tell this point is closely related to the one that any group of processes can be made to fit lots of rules – hence deriving a rule from examples involves generalising (induction).

But, on that sense of interpretation one cannot suppose that an interpretation determines the meaning – it is simply a possible meaning ascription – the correctness of which must be determined otherwise.

What then does W understand by ‘interpretation’. What he seems to have in mind is – roughly – an interpretation is a saying – the provision of a sentence. It is linked to his remarks earlier about intuitions – which are remarks too.

I think that W’s idea is that the understander does not have or need an interpretation between what he hears – namely – say – add 2 – and acting by adding 2. Nothing beyond the words ‘add 2’ tell him what to do. Neither something general nor a remark at each stage. (Cf 186).

Now, one might ask; whoever would think that? However, it essentially seems to combat an idea that there is as it were an intellectual guide for acting the way we do. Thus one might say – having understood the rule or the order the subject knows what to do – nothing needs to tell him what to do beyond that. (See **211**, **212** and **219**). As I read this it is line with what I earlier called W’s naturalism. (Compare it with Davidson’s idea of the anomalism of the mental.)

W seems to link this conclusion with suggesting that obeying a rule must be a custom – and cannot be done only once – (199, 200) – and also it cannot be done ‘privately’

(202, 204). This is opaque – but the first idea about custom has some force – one might say – an understander must be a master of a cluster of notions – understanding is holistic – in which case there must be to an understander a cluster of abilities to understand – if any one of them is to amount to that. That is, as I see it, the argument of **199**.

13. Agreement in Judgement (241 and 242).

W finishes by claiming that language requires agreement in judgement – not only definitions. What he means – I think – is that a definition is an equivalence between two sentences – but if a group agree on that it amounts to nothing – what does each sentence itself mean? So they must agree in some other way – in what they judge in response to the presented world. W is more cautious than some here – he does not lay down a degree of agreement.

14. Conclusions

The rule following argument in PI is very hard to make sense of. I have not done so in any systematic way – hence the rather narrative structure of these notes. It seems to me that W shows that certain conceptions of understanding are mistaken – but many of these are not plausible anyway – eg to do with episodes in consciousness, or with reasons supplementary to the basic understanding; he also develops his ideas of the dependence of teaching on how the learner responds, and also develops to some extent a naturalist conception of human cognition. However, he appears to mishandle the significance of the possibility of mislearning – it is to do with induction – and his circumstantialism seems to be heading in a mistaken direction. (Though as an idea it resembles some of the things that Kripke claims to be present). As a consequence it is hard to know what he thinks we are left with once the superlative facts are abandoned.

He gives every impression of engaging in that activity against which there are countless warnings – of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

Reading;

Wittgenstein; *Philosophical Investigations* secs 138 – 242

S. Kripke; *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982) – the most important response to these sections - taken by most people to be untrue to W's intentions – but a brilliant constructive argument is presented.

M. McGinn; *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* ch 3. – a helpful account.

J. McDowell; 'Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy' in *Mind, Value and Reality* – beautifully captures some things that W is saying, but how much he captures much is the question.

C. Wright; Part I in *Rails to Infinity* – struggles to make sense of these passages – draws on other parts of W's writings.