

# Ludwig Wittgenstein on Rationalism

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## Abstract

If “rationalism” refers to the thesis that there is a right way to do whatever it is that we do—a way that we, with our reason, can discover—then Ludwig Wittgenstein is a critic of rationalism. For our words and deeds are justified only by the rules of particular language-games—but these language-games are themselves justified only insofar as they meet our needs; certainly none of them need be justified by reference to any of the others. Together, our language-games constitute our form of life; though this form of life is not entirely arbitrary—some of its features can be explained by reference to our nature—nonetheless it could be different in many ways. Indeed, it *has* been—and therefore probably *will* be—different in many ways; on some level, we all know this. Philosophy at its worst is the attempt to forget it; philosophy at its best is, therefore, the attempt to remember it.

## 1. Introduction.

“Rationalism” is said in many ways.<sup>1</sup> But if it is right to call Ludwig Wittgenstein a “critic of rationalism,” then “rationalism” refers to the thesis that there is a *right* way to say or do whatever we say or do—a way that we, with our reason, can discern. If this sounds vague, then it is only because Wittgenstein means to articulate an alternative that is quite radical: Wittgenstein insists that, in some sense, we are justified in *nothing* that we say or do—but also that this is okay, since the search for justifications is in some sense a confusion.

Now, philosophy is often seen as a search for justifications—epistemology tells us how we ought to think, for example, while ethics tells us how we ought to act—and so it may seem that Wittgenstein means to criticize philosophy itself. But it is more accurate to say that, in his mature work, Wittgenstein hopes to initiate another way of doing philosophy—one that he compares to therapy: if philosophy done wrongly is the search for justifications, then philosophy done *rightly* is the revelation that this search is neurotic—that it originates, in other words, in anxieties that it cannot relieve.

There may be a paradox somewhere in the vicinity. (If nothing that we say or do is wrong—at least in some sense—then how can it be wrong to deny this?) But the more immediate issue is that, at odds as he seems to be with the entirety of the history of philosophy, Wittgenstein may seem to be entirely mad. In what follows, though, I’ll argue that he is entirely sane—indeed, that he reveals to us something crucial about ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> See my “Rationalism in Eric Voegelin,” in *Tradition v. Rationalism: Voegelin, Oakeshott, Hayek, and Others*, ed. Lee Trepanier and Eugene Callahan (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 51–61.

## 2. Language-Games.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein asks us to consider some of the many ways in which we use language—ways that he calls “language-games”:

Giving orders, and acting on them—

Describing an object by its appearance, or by its measurements—

Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—

Reporting an event—

Speculating about the event—

Forming and testing a hypothesis—

Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—

Making up a story; and reading one—

Acting in a play—

Singing rounds—

Guessing riddles—

Cracking a joke; telling one—

Solving a problem in applied arithmetic—

Translating from one language into another—

Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.<sup>2</sup>

Wittgenstein compares these various language-games to the various tools in a toolbox:

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<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. and trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), § 23.

There is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws.—The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects.<sup>3</sup>

This seems an apt metaphor for at least two reasons. First, the presence of each tool is justified only insofar as it meets one of our needs. Just so, each language-game is justified only insofar as it meets our needs. And, second, there is no sense in which the usefulness of any particular tool is reducible to the usefulness of any other. Just so, whether or not one language-game meets our needs has nothing to do with whether or not any other language-game does. This is not to say, of course, that there is *no* interchange among our various language-games:

The symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus... are, so to speak, suburbs of our language... Our language can be regarded as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, of houses with extensions from various periods, and all this surrounded by a multitude of new suburbs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses.<sup>4</sup>

Different “neighborhoods” of our language—that is, different language-games—were “built”—that is, constructed or adopted—at different times. As such, their “streets”—that is, the rules that define them—were laid out with greater or lesser degrees of reflection. However, even the oldest neighborhoods are continually modified by “commerce” with—that is, conflict with or reinforcement by—other neighborhoods:

How many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question and command?—

There are *countless* kinds; countless different kinds of use of all the things we call “signs,” “words,” “sentences.” And this diversity is not something fixed, given

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<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 11.

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 18.

once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.<sup>5</sup>

As our needs change, so do our tools and our neighborhoods—and, for that matter, our language-games. Wittgenstein offers mathematics as an example of a language-game that has changed in this way:

We can get a *rough picture*... from the changes in mathematics.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that Wittgenstein suggests mathematics as a picture, however rough, of linguistic change because the history of mathematics is so transparent—indeed, is mirrored in the way in which we are taught mathematics. Calculus, for example, was an extension of analytic geometry, which was an extension of algebra, which was an extension of arithmetic; each, at its introduction, prompted the reinterpretation of existing mathematical practice. We experience these reinterpretations as we extend our understanding from arithmetic to algebra to analytic geometry to calculus; our final understanding of mathematics is as it is only because of the history—simultaneously ontogenetic and phylogenetic—that has wrought that understanding.

In one way, the history of mathematics is like the history of any other language-game: its course was neither inevitable nor arbitrary. Just as chess could have developed without bishops—without any alteration of its other rules—mathematics could have developed differently: mathematicians could have ignored the calculus of Newton and Leibniz without changing the rules of arithmetic, algebra, or analytic geometry. But just as there was a reason that chess developed with bishops—the game would have been less interesting without pieces that could move indefinitely far, but only diagonally—there were reasons that mathematics

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<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 23.

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 23.

developed as it did: once one can represent geometrical constructions algebraically—that is, abstractly—an equally abstract way to compute their areas becomes profoundly *useful*.

Without bishops, chess would have been less useful for entertainment—would have been, that is, less interesting. But things are not interesting or uninteresting in *themselves*: they are only interesting or uninteresting *to us*. Had we achieved only the intelligence of young children, chess would have developed to look rather more like checkers—without, that is, any differences among the pieces at all. Just so, were we pelagic like whales, any game played in merely two dimensions might have seemed hopelessly childish—rather as checkers does to us. It is the task of the philosopher, Wittgenstein suggests, to offer this kind of explanation—to explain how our *language-games* are by reference to how *we* are:

What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; not curiosities, however, but facts that no one has doubted, which have escaped notice only because they are always before our eyes.<sup>7</sup>

That almost all of us have ten fingers is such a remark on our natural history: that most of us count in decimal rather than binary is clearly not *arbitrary*, but it is also could have been different—had *we* been different. For all of its obviousness, however, the link between having ten fingers and counting in decimal has often been overlooked—as the millennia of numerological significance attributed to the number ten attests.

Counting in binary would not, of course, have been dramatically different from counting in decimal: the decision of arithmetical base is *mathematically* arbitrary. Nonetheless, it might be that mathematics has the *least* arbitrary history of any of our language-games: for mathematics to

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<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 415.

be *radically* different—for addition not to be associative, for example—we would likely have to be *so* different that we would have trouble recognizing ourselves at all.

In one way, Wittgenstein blurs the distinctions among language-games: mathematics, joking, and singing are *not* different in kind, insofar as they are all equally legitimate—equally paradigmatic examples of language in use. In another way, however, Wittgenstein sharpens the distinctions among language-games: mathematics, joking, and singing *are* different in kind, insofar as each is, well, a different language-game—one defined by rules peculiar to it alone. There is in this no contradiction: since our language-games are all equally legitimate, no language-game depends for its justification on others.

Mathematics offers only a *rough* picture of linguistic change because certain extensions of mathematics—especially those initiated by Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, the teachers of Wittgenstein—are often taken to be *justifications* of previous mathematics. (It is as though we were not *really* sure that two and two make four until Peano articulated for us his axioms.) On the contrary, Wittgenstein insists, to articulate the grammar of any language is to offer a *clarification*, not a *justification*, of that language. Thus the “foundations” of mathematics are a *clarification*, not a *justification*, of mathematics:

The *mathematical* problems of what is called foundations are no more the foundation of mathematics for us than the painted rock is the support of a painted tower.<sup>8</sup>

Mathematics is—like all of language—our construction: it has the rules that it does because we decided, consciously or not, that it would. Though our decisions were not arbitrary, they are only

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<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, revised edition, ed. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), § 7.16.



*justified* insofar as their product meets our needs: since mathematics was *our* construction, there is no other authority to whom to appeal. And whether or not arithmetic can be derived from some set of axioms is not relevant to whether arithmetic meets our needs.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Rule-Following.

When playing a language-game, what makes certain moves right and others wrong? Why is it, for example, that the answer to “ $1 + 1$ ” is “2” and not “3”? Well, one might respond, that is just what the rule of addition demands! Indeed—but who is to say that what we have been calling “addition,” the way we have been interpreting “+,” is not in fact *schmaddition*—a language-game quite like addition, except that the answer to “ $1 + 1$ ” is, at least on this occasion, “3”? More

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Steiner points out that Wittgenstein—in his *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, a work philosophically continuous with his *Investigations*—is wrong to attack Gödel’s Theorem. For Gödel proved only that, within mathematics, a certain proposition is such that neither it nor its denial can be proven, but Wittgenstein apparently misinterpreted Gödel’s proof as somehow depending upon Gödel’s controversial interpretation of it—that, within mathematics, a certain proposition is *true* and nonetheless not provable; Wittgenstein insisted only that “truth” had no meaning in such a context—because it had no use. Ironically, Steiner notes, Gödel’s Theorem—stripped of Gödel’s own interpretation of it—is profoundly *congenial* to the Wittgensteinian Picture of Language: Wittgenstein insists that mathematics *need* not be derived from any foundation, while Gödel proved that mathematics *cannot* be derived from any foundation. See Mark Steiner, “Wittgenstein as His Own Worst Enemy: The Case of Gödel’s Theorem,” *Philosophia Mathematica* 9, no. 3 (2001): 257–279.

generally, who is to say that *any* of our “mistakes” are not just the results of *correctly* following *different* rules—or that our “successes” are not just the results of *incorrectly* following different rules? Normativity seems to evaporate before our very eyes:

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule. The answer was: if every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule, then it can also be brought into conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.<sup>10</sup>

It may seem that what we need is a *meta*-rule that tells us how to play the relevant language-game: when you see “+,” the rule might go, interpret it as *addition* rather than *schmaddition*. Yet could one not interpret this new rule in more than one way? In response, we seemed obliged to offer a *meta*-meta-rule. Yet could not one interpret *this* new rule in more than one way? A vicious regress—one of our own creation—suddenly threatens us:

That there is a misunderstanding here is shown by the mere fact that in this chain of reasoning we place one interpretation behind another, as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another lying behind it.<sup>11</sup>

If to follow a rule is to follow the meta-rule of how to follow that rule, then to follow the meta-rule would be to follow the meta-meta-rule of how to follow that meta-rule... and so on. Stepping back, it seems that there would be *nothing* that it is to follow a rule—nothing, in other

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<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 201.

<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 201.

words, that it would be to be right rather than wrong.<sup>12</sup> This skeptical conclusion shows only, Wittgenstein suggests, that something has gone wrong:

What we thereby show is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an interpretation, but which, from case to case of application, is exhibited in what we call “following the rule” and “going against it.”<sup>13</sup>

Normativity dissolved under the vicious regress of interpretations because the limitless interpretability of every rule showed that the difference between right and wrong was an illusion. But a private language does not solve this problem: if one cannot be wrong about to which of one’s ideas and sensations one’s words refer, then the very distinction between right and wrong once again collapses. But this hints at another solution to the vicious regress:

“Following a rule” is a practice.<sup>14</sup>

Our words, including our mathematical words, operate according to rules—but these rules are not such that we can *succeed* or *fail* in discovering them. Rather, they are *created* by communal agreement: everyone insisting that the answer to “ $1 + 1$ ” is “2” *just is* what makes it true that the answer to “ $1 + 1$ ” is “2.” A word, remember, gets its meaning through its use—that is, through the way that *we* use it:

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<sup>12</sup> Obviously, my presentation of this paradox owes much to that of Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). It is less obvious to what extent my solution to the paradox is similar to his: Kripke is usually taken to offer a solution to the paradox—what is often called the “skeptical solution”—that is fairly unsubtle, but it seems to me that he might be interpreted more charitably than he usually is.

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 201.

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 202.

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.<sup>15</sup>

Publicity, Wittgenstein insists, is essential to normativity: normativity demands fallibility, while fallibility demands publicity. Language is therefore *inevitably* public: in language, as in morality, the only reason that distinguishing right from wrong *matters* is so that we might do justice, broadly speaking, to one another.

### 3. Forms of Life.

Of course, this insight runs the risk of *profound* misinterpretation—regarding both language and morality. True, we would have neither language nor morality were we not intrinsically social: alone, one cannot learn to speak—or, for that matter, to act—rightly. But this does *not* mean that, having learned to speak and to act rightly, one cannot talk to oneself—or, for that matter, do right by oneself. For to learn to speak and to act rightly is to rebuild *within oneself* the community that teaches one to speak and to act rightly. It is to make of oneself a multitude—to divide oneself into legislator and subject.<sup>16</sup>

Recall that, for Wittgenstein, everyone insisting that the answer to "1 + 1" is "2" *just is* what makes it true that the answer to "1 + 1" is "2." One might conclude from this that *nothing more than* communal agreement distinguishes right from wrong—such that, alone, one can

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<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 202.

<sup>16</sup> See Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 136–138.

neither speak nor act rightly. This is not, of course, an especially robust sort of normativity. Indeed, it *reduces* the normative to the descriptive—to certain facts about how people in fact respond: “ $1 + 1 = 2$ ” *just means*, if the reductionist is right, that “most agree, most of the time, that ‘ $1 + 1 = 2$ .’” But Wittgenstein is clear that this is *not* his position:

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?”—What is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life.<sup>17</sup>

It is possible—albeit not particularly likely—that *everyone* could one day make the same mistake, could decide for example that the answer to “ $1 + 1$ ” is “3.” But this would still be a *mistake*: the answer to “ $1 + 1$ ” would still be “2.”

Why is this? Well, our rules for arithmetic are deeply embedded in the language that we have created over our history. We could have created a very different language—one in which, somehow, the answer to “ $1 + 1$ ” was “3”—but we have created *this* language, *this* form of life. And this form of life determines that the answer to “ $1 + 1$ ” is not “3” but “2.”

Language takes on a life of its own: we construct it, but then it constructs us. Of course, we can *alter* our language—including the mathematical aspects of our language. This is exactly what would happen if everyone began answering “3” to “ $1 + 1$ ”—*and continued to do so indefinitely*. The paradox in this is merely apparent:

It is not only agreement in definitions, but also (odd as it may sound) agreement in judgments that is required for communication by means of language. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so.—It is one thing to describe methods of

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<sup>17</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 241.

measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call “measuring” is in part determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement.<sup>18</sup>

Words mean what they do because of how we use them: “meter” has the meaning that it does because most of us agree, for most things, how many meters long those things are. *I* cannot change, *by myself, on a whim*, what “meter” means—but *we* can change, *together, over time*, what “meter” means: we need only start *measuring* in a different way. Just so, *I* cannot change, *by myself, on a whim*, what “+” means—but *we* can change, *together, over time*, what “+” means: we need only start *adding* in a different way.

Again, it is doubtful that we—the species that we are, living in the world that we do—*could* start adding in a way as different as this. But the point is a general one: certainly many of our language-games that are at least *somewhat* open to revision—the best evidence of which is that we have in fact spent our history revising them.

## 5. Conclusion.

Particular thoughts and actions—that is, particular moves in particular language-games—are justified by the rules of those language-games. But those rules—that is, those language-games themselves—are justified only insofar as playing them meets our needs; certainly none of them must be justified by any of the others. In some cases, it seems, we *had* to play the particular language-games that we did; in these cases, we can *explain*—though in no real sense *justify*—our playing of these particular language-games by reference to our nature. In other cases, it seems,

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<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 242.

we did *not* have to play the particular language-games that we did; we could have chosen—and may yet choose—to play otherwise.

Perhaps, over time, all of us will converge on a particular set of language-games—that is, on a particular form of life; presumably, this form of life would be *explained*—though only in a degenerate sense *justified*—by the unchangeable aspects of our biology. In the meantime, though, it seems that we ought to agree with Wittgenstein that rationalism—that is, using mere reason to prove justified a particular form of life—is doomed to failure:

“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 bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.”<sup>19</sup>

Why, since it is doomed to failure, is rationalism so appealing? After all, Wittgenstein sometimes seems to identify the search for justifications with the entirety of the history of philosophy—and we have been doing philosophy for a while now! It is not obvious that Wittgenstein ever answers this question himself—but perhaps the answer was unsaid because it was so obvious: we search for justifications because we are afraid. We want to prove that our form of life will *not* change again—even though we know, on some level, that it will. And so we tell ourselves stories wherein we have *at last* gotten it right—stories that guarantee that there won’t be any more scientific or political revolutions. Even though we know, on some level, that there will be. Wittgenstein therefore seems right to compare his way of doing philosophy with therapy—for the alternative way of doing philosophy seems, when explained in this way, neurotic indeed.

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<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 217.

If there is anything to be said for the history of philosophy, then perhaps it is that it has been—at its best—always already therapeutic. Though they are often called “rationalists,” what are else are Plato and Immanuel Kant trying to tell us but that there are inevitable limits on our knowledge? But perhaps this is a topic for another essay.



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