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Essay #3

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein examines various concepts related to philosophy of language, in particular, the role of rules in language. I will examine Wittgenstein's objections to the idea that language-use can be explained as rule-following behaviour. Afterward, I will provide Wittgenstein's alternative explanation for language-use, and then I will briefly examine a few interpretations regarding Wittgenstein's specific objections.

Wittgenstein is concerned with whether a particular model of meaning and understanding can explain language-use. This model, which is the Platonist model of meaning, posits that rules guide the use of words, and since meanings are like rules, to know the meaning of a word is to know the rule for applying that word correctly. When a person learns a language, he learns the meanings of words, and when he wants to use the language, he is guided in his use by the meanings he learned. In this model, understanding is constituted as knowing the appropriate rule, and being able to use words correctly is explained via one's knowledge of the correct rule. If a word has a meaning, then there are correct and incorrect uses for that word, and since meaning prescribes the use of the word, the correct use is in accord with the norm, and the incorrect use is not in accord with the norm. (Rockney)

In §138, Wittgenstein notes that a person can play various language games by using words to perform actions, such as requesting or calling out for someone, and given those actions it is natural to assume language games must be rule governed, but this assumption is just the Platonist model resurfacing. Therefore, in the Platonist model, language functions in such a way that the meaning of a

word consists in a rule for the use of that word in various language games (§138; §139). Furthermore, to understand a word is to know the rule for applying that word, since knowledge consists in knowing the rule. Wittgenstein provides an example where understanding a series of numbers consists in understanding the formula or rule for the correct continuation of that series. If a person can continue the series correctly, then he has figured out the correct rule for that series. Although it seems very simplistic, this model is meant to explain how people who understand a particular language are able to use that language correctly, and people who do not understand that language cannot use it correctly.

Wittgenstein objects to the Platonist view that language-use is explained as rule-following behavior, and he discusses two objections: the infinite regress of rules problem, and the deviant (or bent) rules problem. These objections are structured in such a way that in attempting to escape the infinite regress problem, one is directly plunged into the deviant rules problem, and vice versa. Furthermore, these objections are designed in such a way that any other model of meaning, such as the Lockean or social convention models of meaning, will end up with the same consequences (Rockney).

In the Platonist model, understanding a word just consists in knowing the rules for its application, just as understanding a series of numbers just consists in knowing the formula or rule for continuing the series correctly. To have understanding is to know the rule for applying a word, but knowing the rule cannot simply mean the rule just occurred to oneself, since the rule could occur and the person does not understand the rule, as seen in the formula example (§152). If to have understanding is to know the rule for applying a word, and the only way to understand the rule is to know the rule for applying the rule, this will not help unless there is also a rule for applying the rule,

and this creates the infinite regress problem (§86; §141; §198; §201). However, this infinite regress only seems to be an issue when the rule requires explicit knowledge.

In order to resist the infinite regress problem, the knowledge of the rule for applying a word could consist of implicit knowledge. For example, a person applies a word because he understands the rule, but his knowledge is implicit, so he does not require a rule for applying the previous rule, and so the infinite regress stops. However, if knowledge of the rule is implicit, then he will be unsure about which rule he is actually following because he cannot articulate which rule he is following, since articulating the rule requires explicit knowledge, but explicit knowledge plunges him into the infinite regress problem. If we are supposed to know what our own words mean, since knowledge of what the word means explains our ability to use the words correctly, and if that knowledge is implicit, then it seems we apply a word correctly only because we applied it correctly (Rockney). Said differently, we require implicit knowledge of how to apply a rule in order to escape the infinite regress problem, but by doing so, there is also nothing to prevent us from using implicit knowledge for applying words as well. If a person tries to escape the infinite regress problem by suggesting rules can be known implicitly, so there is no need to articulate a rule for applying the previous rule, there would no longer be any reason to have an explicit rule for applying words. If the ability to apply a rule is the same ability used to apply a word, and it is possible to have that ability without using an explicit rule, then it should be possible to apply a word without requiring an explicit rule to explain it (§197-§202).

In §151, Wittgenstein says there is more than one way to apply a rule. In his example, A writes down a series of numbers and B watches him and tries to come up with the next number in the series. At some point, B may say he knows what the next number should be in the series, but various things may have occurred that explain how B knows what the next number should be. Wittgenstein

asks if these various occurrences, such as applying a formula when it suddenly occurs, constitutes understanding (§152). Wittgenstein argues when a formula suddenly occurs to B, this cannot account for understanding since the formula might occur, but B suddenly forgets how to do algebra, so B is unable to apply the formula correctly. In §179, Wittgenstein talks about the role that circumstances play in the different language games. Depending on A's circumstance, when a formula occurs to A, he continue the series if he understands the formula and has used algebra in the past. The same formula occurs to B, but he will not know how to apply the formula if he has not used algebra in the past. Different circumstances explain why A can use a formula to continue the series, and B cannot.

In another example, a student is told to use the rule, "add 2" for a series of numbers, and the student's understanding is tested all the way up to 1000 (§186-§187). He begins the series in the manner his instructor wanted: 2, 4, 6, 8. However, when asked to go beyond 1000, the student writes something different: 996, 998, 1000, 1004, 1008. The teacher tells the student he has gone astray, but the student insists he has written the series correctly. This is because all of the examples used to instruct the student on how to continue the series are consistent with the student deviating from the series by writing 1004, 1008, 1012 (§187-§189; §198; §201). The student interprets the teacher in this way because when the student learns to construct the series by using the rule "add 2" the student is exposed to only a finite amount of examples (§141; §208). A consequence of this is that any explanation can be misunderstood or interpreted in a different way, and even if a further explanation is given, this further explanation can also be misinterpreted. There is nothing in the training provided, or the rule taught, that prevents the student from continuing the series in a wildly divergent direction (§185). Adding 4 to 1000 is consistent with another rule, just not the rule the teacher wanted the student to follow, and so the student follows a deviant rule that is entirely consistent with the training

he was given. Wittgenstein's claim is that on this model of understanding, nothing can impede the possibility of a person understanding a rule differently than someone else, since a person's application of a word, or the continuation of a series, can at any point deviate from my own application.

In the Platonist model, to know the meaning is to know the rule for applying the word, but if people are following a deviant rule that has not yet shown up in the finite number of applications observed, then it is possible people actually mean something different than what we think they mean. In Wittgenstein's example, everything the student does is consistent with the training given to him, but because the student only received a finite segment of examples, there is always a chance he will follow a deviant rule. The implication is that no matter how much exposure one has had regarding someone else's use of language, the possibility remains for misunderstanding what other people mean, including the possibility that we do not even know what we mean by our words (§75; §208; §186).

One problem with using implicit knowledge is that if a person cannot formulate the rule for both the application of the rule and the application of the word, then that person will not have explicit knowledge for what he is going to do in the future. If knowledge is implicit, a person could unknowingly follow a deviant rule, since the rule he is following is implicit. He cannot formulate a rule if his knowledge is implicit, and if he does not know which rule he is following, then he will not know what the rule will require him to do later on in the series. If understanding consists in knowing the rule for applying our words, then implicit knowledge necessitates the idea that we do not actually know what our words mean.

As a summary of events thus far, there is a certain conception of how language works that nearly everyone shares, namely the Platonist model of understanding. Wittgenstein's infinite regress

and deviant rule arguments seem to lead to skepticism about meaning, but only if we begin with the Platonist model. Wittgenstein proposes an alternative account of how language functions, whereby the account of understanding needs to be practical, and not an intellectual grasp of a rule or formula. Understanding what a word means consists in having an ability to apply that word. For example, understanding algebra consists in doing certain kinds of math problems, and those abilities consist of simpler and simpler abilities that are compounded together, until a person is finally able to articulate them. This implies that understanding does not necessarily require explicit knowledge (§154; §78).

Wittgenstein provides a distinction between following a rule and being in accord with one (§198-§201). To follow a rule, one must have knowledge of the rule he is following. To be in accord with a rule, one need not be aware of the rule itself. If understanding is a skill or an ability that has a level of implicit knowledge, then one can be in accord with a rule when using words without needing to be explicitly aware of those words. If a person has to follow a rule, so knowledge is explicit, then the infinite regress problem emerges. Yet, Wittgenstein says no course of action can be determined by a rule, since anything a person does in response to a rule can be brought into accord on some other interpretation of the rule, so anything a person does will be in conflict with a rule on some other interpretation (§201). Formulating a rule allows for multiple interpretations, and those interpretations can be interpreted in multiple ways, so the only way to break out of this infinite regress is to find a way of grasping or responding to the rule without interpreting or assigning any meaning to it.

In §213, Wittgenstein suggests a method of continuing a series that does not depend on assigning any meaning to a rule or formula. That is, when a person responds to a rule in just the way he was trained to do (§206). This is because understanding starts as a basic skill, and in following the rule blindly, a person sees a rule and reacts to it in the way she was trained to do, and this method does not require interpretation or assigning any meaning. Wittgenstein's interlocutor says if a person

only responds as trained, and she is therefore not following a rule, then what a sign means and what it tells her to do, will not have any connection with how or why she is responding (§198). If a person responds to words with no grasp of their meanings, like responding to a rule without an interpretation of it, this suggests the person is just like the shopkeeper from §1. That is, the shopkeeper's way of filling the order does not require him to understand the meaning of the words on the list, since he can be trained to fill orders without knowing what the words mean. Wittgenstein seems to be suggesting that once we are trained to respond to symbols in a particular way, such as squiggly marks on a sign, then the sign means stop because our stopping behavior is part of a custom or regularity (§198; §199).

Wittgenstein suggests if one understands a word, there will be a pattern or regularity in the uses of that word, and it will look as if the person is following a rule (§198; §199; §208). Put differently, the continuation of a series will show understanding only when one's response is part of a broader custom or regularity. Wittgenstein tells us to imagine a person following a pattern that someone else has drawn, and the line he is following serves as his rule. However, there is no regularity of any kind, so it cannot be a rule, since a rule requires a regularity, such that someone else should be able to learn how to continue the line without conspiring with others (§237).

There are patterns and regularities in how people use words, since that is what makes a language meaningful. The Platonist view suggests patterns arise in language-use because people are actually following rules. According to Wittgenstein, the Platonist view forces you into the infinite regress or deviant rule problems, since there is always more than one way to interpret and continue any pattern or rule. Therefore, Wittgenstein says training allows a person to respond or comply with a rule without requiring any interpretation of the rule (§201; 206§). The interlocutor rejects this view because he wants to know why proceeding in this way is in accord with what the rule actually means.

Wittgenstein says meaning is determined by use, so regularities in our uses are not a consequence of what the words mean. The words mean what they do because of the regularities in our uses, which is explained by the similar training people undergo. In §190, the interlocutor brings up the Platonist view by suggesting what the formula means determines the steps that are to be taken. Wittgenstein counters by suggesting the ways in which people are taught to use the formula determine what the formula means. A person is trained to do one thing rather than another, and that training brings it about that the symbols he is using mean what they do, so the regularities in behavior are not explained by any reference to meanings, rather, the meanings are conferred on them by the regularities in behavior.

Wittgenstein says meaning appears to be the driving force responsible for our applications of words (§219). However, this is not really the case, since our training determines what we do at every step, and our uses determine the meaning. After extensive training, producing a series becomes automatic, so it will seem to the student as if he is applying a rule, but he is actually responding in such a way because of the training he received (§238). With enough training, it will seem as if something else, like meaning or a rule, is responsible for what we do, but that is an illusion.

Given these difficulties with the Platonist model of understanding, scholars have proposed four interpretations in order to make sense of Wittgenstein's infinite regress and deviant rule arguments (Rockney). In the first interpretation, Wittgenstein is viewed as being a total skeptic about meaning, and it is just impossible to know what anything means. In the second interpretation, which is the Straight Solution, scholars suggest Wittgenstein is being skeptical about the model of understanding that generates the problems. If a better model existed, it could resolve the problems with the infinite regress and deviant rule arguments. Since every model of meaning seems to accept the view that meaning is a norm, and understanding is just knowledge of that norm, it is difficult to

say whether it is actually feasible to find a new model. In the third interpretation, scholars suggest Wittgenstein's arguments for the infinite regress and deviant rule problems are meant to show we cannot know what our words mean, but since that is an absurd conclusion, there must be something wrong with Wittgenstein's arguments. Consequently, it is up to philosophers themselves to uncover the errors in Wittgenstein's arguments (Rockney).

In the fourth interpretation, named Quietism, scholars suggests Wittgenstein's arguments are not problems that need to be solved, and we must not be too bothered by the consequences created by them (Rockney). Given this, there is no need to look for an alternative model of meaning. Yet, it seems difficult to accept these consequences, especially for the deviant rule problem, since that problem suggests people can mean different things when using the same word (§31; §76). Since there are no sharp boundaries around words, and given Wittgenstein's own family resemblance theory, words can have a family of meanings, and some of those meanings will overlap (§77).

Quietism scholars suggest we all speak different idiolects that have overlapping similarities (Rockney). This view does not require that one person's use of a word and another person's use of that same word must be subordinate to one common meaning. If we all mean something slightly different by the same word, then the use one person makes of his words determines what those words mean to him, and the uses I make of my words determine what those words mean to me. Given a shared background and training, there will be a lot of overlap, but not enough overlap for people to mean the exact same things all of the time. One implication is that people are following deviant rules, assuming they are following any rule at all. However, deviant rules are only a problem if people cling to the idea that a single meaning of a word determines the uses we make of it. If we say the uses of a word determine the meaning the word has, then this deviant rule problem seems less intimidating, and not necessarily a problem that must be overcome (Rockney).

I agree with the Quietists who postulate that Wittgenstein's arguments are not problems that need to be solved. Given that the deviant rule problem occurs when one uses implicit knowledge to escape the infinite regress problem, I will focus my discussion specifically on the deviant rule problem. The deviant rule problem says people can mean different things even when they are using the same word, but if we all speak our own kind of idiolect with overlapping similarities, then nothing here necessitates one person's use of a word and another person's use of that word must be subordinate to one common meaning. In this sense, the deviant rule problem should not really be considered a problem at all, since in the vast majority of time, people will have overlapping idiolects that allow us to communicate successfully. There will no doubt be fringe cases where there is very little if any overlap, so communication will break down, but these cases seem to be quite rare.

It does not trouble me to use implicit knowledge as a means of preventing Wittgenstein's infinite regress problem. It may be true that using implicit knowledge implies that I will not be able to formulate the rule I am following, and because of this, I cannot articulate how I am able to apply a word correctly. Interestingly, some neuroscientists in the cognitive psychology arena have suggested that unconscious processes, akin to implicit knowledge, play very important roles in every day life (Obhi). For example, some researchers have suggested that conscious control or intention of an action is just an illusion, and unconscious processes actually influence and guide behavior (Obhi). Assuming this is true, it does make logical sense to use implicit knowledge as a means of stopping the infinite regress problem, even if the consequences of such an action seem unsatisfactory and potentially insidious. Ultimately, I am not troubled by either the deviant rule argument, since I side with Quietism, nor am I troubled by the infinite regress argument, given the discoveries in neuroscience that point directly to unconscious processes and implicit knowledge as a major cause of human behavior.

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