

## WITTGENSTEIN ON RULE FOLLOWING

In the early phase of his philosophical enterprise that covers the themes of *Notebooks 1914-16.*, *Prototractatus and Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*<sup>1</sup> (hereafter, TLP) Wittgenstein was of the opinion that there is a striking resemblance between the structure of language and the structure of the world (reality). This isomorphism between language and the world, felt Wittgenstein, can be vindicated by introducing a 'logically perfect language' (ideal language), which is totally governed by a single, unique, rigid system of calculus that does not allow any loose-play. In other words, such a calculus acts in accordance with the fixed rules of truth-functional logic. Accordingly, the 'picture theory of meaning' (denotative theory of meaning) advanced by Wittgenstein in his TLP suggests that to understand the meaning of any expression one has to have adequate mastery of the rules that govern its use. The true transition in Wittgenstein's line of thinking towards the workings of language and its underlying logical structure is obvious in his well acclaimed posthumous publication *Philosophical Investigations* (hereafter, PI). In this matured work of Wittgenstein the repudiation of the views advocated in his TLP towards the 'logic of language' is normally attributed to the following reasons. First of all, realising the vulnerability of the view that language has a unique discoverable function, namely, the 'logical clarification of thought' which can be expressed by means of structure revealing analysis of language and the world; and such analysis has a single underlying logic, Wittgenstein put forward a thesis in his PI that there is no one 'logic of language', but there are many 'logics of language' that govern our linguistic practices. It amounts to saying that the 'logic of language' has no unique essence but has collection of innumerable practices. Secondly, the belief that there can be a systematically worked out philosophical theory that can solve the philosophical riddles which arise out of our misunderstandings of the workings of language is misleading. What Wittgenstein felt was that instead

of formulating a systematic theory to solve the problems of philosophy we must aim to 'dissolve' these problems by clearing away the misconceptions about language. This allows philosophy to be a 'therapeutic'<sup>2</sup> enterprise rather than a systematic exercise. Thus, informalism replaces formalism. Nevertheless, both *TLP* and *PI* share the claim that the problems of philosophy arise out of our misunderstandings of the language at its functional level. In addition to that, both the works share the view that our inquiry into the workings of language is a 'grammatical inquiry'.<sup>3</sup> The point at issue at this juncture is not whether Wittgenstein's philosophy can be compartmentalised into early and later phases, but to show the continuity of certain cardinal issues that traverse in all his philosophical literature. One such important issue worth consideration is his treatment of the notion of rule-following.

Wittgenstein, *inter alia*, was deeply concerned with the view whether understanding<sup>4</sup> a language is a rule-governed activity. He makes an undaunted attempt to reconsider his views in respect to the workings and understanding of language. The explanation given in *TLP* as regards the understanding of language reveals that language as an activity abides by certain fixed rules which determine the meanings of various expressions. In this sense, a person is said to have understood the meaning of an expression provided he has mastered the rules that govern the structure of language. What Wittgenstein aims to show in his *PI* is not that language is not a rule governed activity, but the rules that determine the meanings<sup>5</sup> of various expressions in language have a single, unique, rigid calculus that controls the rules. More than anything, it is the view that these rules exist independent of us made Wittgenstein philosophically more uncomfortable. According to him, the proclivity of most of the philosophers is to look for generality, whether such a generality has any rational basis. This description of rule-following is often referred to as Platonism<sup>6</sup>. Against this Platonism, Wittgenstein argues that language has many logics. These logics are identified with 'language games'<sup>7</sup> whose use-rules are open for public accessibility.

## I

The argument put forward by Wittgenstein in order to show the absurdity of Platonism assumes the form of *reductio*. According to this

argument, the supposed distinction between 'obeying a rule' and 'disobeying a rule' - which is the base for Platonism - is illfounded. In an attempt to vindicate this point Wittgenstein proceeds in the following way.

The uniformity of rules followed in logic and mathematics determines the value structures of various propositions in advance so that one can always check whether one is following a rule correctly. The inexorability of logic and mathematics lies in their following a rigid, uniform system of rules. Thus, Platonism can be best compared with rails laid down in advance to infinity. To quote Wittgenstein in this context :

Whence comes the idea that the beginning of a series is a visible section of rails invisibly laid to infinity? Well, we might imagine rails instead of a rule. And infinitely long rails correspond to the unlimited application of a rule.

All these steps are really already taken means : I no longer have any choice. The rule, once stamped with a particular meaning, traces the lines along which it is to be followed through the whole space. But if something of this sort really were the case, how would it help?...<sup>8</sup>

The point that Wittgenstein was trying to make here is not that rules do not guide us to correctness; rather the general misinterpretation of the rules in terms of fixed rail track laid in advance to infinity reduces a rule-follower to the level of a machine or an automata that blindly follows the track to which it is latched. If this model is employed in language, argues Wittgenstein, then the very purpose of language as a medium of communication is defeated. He maintains that language consists of diversity of rules that govern the use of various expressions. The absurdity of Platonism, according to Wittgenstein, can be shown in the following way.

Let us assume that there are rules laid down in advance like a 'rail track'. A rule follower may think that he is following a rule. In this situation, contests Wittgenstein, we have to look for a connection between a rule-follower and the rule followed by him. The rules laid down in advance to infinity like rails do not serve the purpose unless the complete guidance of rules is in the mind of a rule-follower which made him stick to the rules. Now, a rule follower may have a flash

of understanding with regard to the meaning of an expression. This he may attribute to the rules that he follows. Wittgenstein asks: if a rule-follower has an ordinary flash of understanding when he was not following a rule, then does he attribute this to the rules that he follows otherwise? Wittgenstein says:

This was a paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the question of 'obeying a rule' or 'disobeying a rule' does not arise. Once this point is proved the very edifice on which Platonism is erected collapses.

Another important flaw that Wittgenstein notices in Platonism is that to obey a rule is to have a sense of being guided or coerced by a rule. In other words, the rule dictates terms to the rule-follower. Thus, a rule-follower is prevented from contributing anything to what counts as following the rule. Now, the real problem, holds Wittgenstein, with the notion of rule-following is that the belief that one is being guided by a rule does not really guarantee that the rule is being followed. Someone might think that he is following a rule when he is not applying it correctly. Similarly, a person who has no knowledge of the existence of a particular rule may be following that rule inadvertently. In a sense, he is not following a rule at all. This point drives Wittgenstein home as the supposed distinction between obeying a rule and disobeying a rule, in this context, is illogical; and hence illfounded.

Wittgenstein attacks the view that rule-following is an inner mental activity. Some philosophers are of the opinion that some thing really occurs in the rule-follower's mind when he is following a rule and provides him an infallible guidance. Wittgenstein questions: what is this something? If this 'something' is that one which attaches a rule-follower to the fixed rails like rules laid down in advance to infinity, then it qualifies as an instant 'mental talisman'. What does this 'instant mental talisman' signify? Is it a mental image or a picture? To throw some more light on this point Wittgenstein puts it in the following manner.

It is as if we could grasp the whole use of the word in a flash:

Like what e.g.? - Can't the use - in a certain sense - be grasped in a flash? And in what sense can it not? The point is, that it is as if we could 'grasp' it in a flash in yet another and much more direct sense than that -- But have you a model for this? No. It is just this expression suggests itself to us. As the result of the crossing of different pictures.

You have no model of this superlative fact, but you are seduced into using a super-expression. (It might be called a philosophical superlative.)<sup>10</sup>

Wittgenstein does not deny the fact that we grasp the whole use of the word (meaning of the word) in a flash. But the description of the flash as an 'instant mental talisman' that occurs to a person when he grasps the use of a word that gives the meaning cannot have any mental model. This shows that Platonism not only requires the fixed rails like rules, but also an 'instant mental talisman' that connect what is happening in the rule-follower's mind to the fixed rules. This requirement, maintains Wittgenstein, can never be met.

Another equally important feature of Platonism is that rules have an independent existence. Wittgenstein holds that this unwarranted conviction is grounded in the belief that rules give rise to objectivity. This conception is so strong in the minds of the rule-followers as it is obviously clear from the rules of arithmetic which impose certain standards of correctness on the rule-followers. It is this belief in the objectivity or externality that gives the rule-follower a sense of satisfaction. Against this conception, Wittgenstein holds that the rigid calculus employed in arithmetic may not hold good when it is employed in language. Because in language what constitutes a rule is our collective use of it. In this regard what really counts as following a rule is to adopt a common practice that is guided by agreement in judgements in a community of language-users. In other words, the agreement in judgements is necessarily an agreement in shared 'custom'. To recall the statement of Hume, in this context, that what we call the 'necessary relation' between cause and effect is only based on habit and custom. In fact, for Hume, there are no external standards that guarantee the causal nexus in any possible way. Likewise rule-following, according to Wittgenstein, is a collective activity based on certain accepted linguistic practices of a community of language-users. There is no rigidity involved in this practice. The concept of understanding language is the concept of an acquired skill. For

Wittgenstein, language is an instrument of measurement of our customs. Further illustration in this regard is provided by Wittgenstein. Let us think of a 'signpost'. It is meant to serve a definite purpose. This does not mean that a 'signpost' imposes its purpose on us. Its purpose simply rests upon the fact that there is a custom, a general practice to use 'signposts' for providing directions to the public. In a sense, it is its function. Similarly, in language, "A rule stands there like a signpost."<sup>11</sup> A natural corollary to this statement is that "a person goes by a signpost only in so far as there exists a regular use of signposts, a custom."<sup>12</sup> It amounts to saying that "The application of the concept of following a rule presupposes a custom."<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, the terms 'custom', 'institution', 'use', 'practice' are used as synonyms by Wittgenstein.

## II

The two most important considerations that follow from Wittgenstein's analysis of rule-following are : (1) Rule-following is neither an inner mental activity nor a mysterious practice. This is clear from the analogy of 'signpost'. When a person goes in the direction that 'a signpost' indicates, it is not, according to Wittgenstein, that he is internally 'obeying a rule' and behaving in accordance with his internal mental act. To understand rules and to follow them is to familiarise oneself with the existing customs of a community of language-users. (2) Following a rule is essentially a social practice. This social practice suggests that rule-following is a mutual agreement in judgements that is prevalent in a community of language-users. Wittgenstein remarks that the word 'agreement' and the word 'rule' are cousins. Because "If I teach anyone the use of one word, he learns the use of the other with it."<sup>14</sup> This conception of Wittgenstein rules out the possibility of an outlaw formulating his own rules and observing them. Even if he follows a rule in accordance with his own formulations there is no way for him to check whether he is following it correctly. Thus, a man in isolation from the community of language-users cannot follow any rule, as rule following is not a private affair. Whether someone is following a rule correctly is checked through the available public criteria. The key notion in Wittgenstein's analysis of rule-following is the notion of 'custom'. He insists that the notion of custom must be taken in its literal sense. A custom is something regular, repeated and established. Since use-rule

are based on well established customs there is no extrinsic or objective factor present in rule-following. In such a situation one is said to have 'disobeyed a rule' only when his linguistic practices do not conform to the existing social customs. Otherwise, there is no external justification, maintains Wittgenstein, excepting relying on these customs. He feels " Giving... grounds... come to an end... the end... is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game."<sup>15</sup> Language, for Wittgenstein, is necessarily built on a prelinguistic system. In order to comprehend the workings of language we must go beneath it and investigate its foundations. These foundations serve as hinges on which our linguistic practices firmly sit. In a sense to follow a rule is to follow it unreflectively. This point is further substantiated by the remark of Wittgenstein "When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly."<sup>16</sup> Thus, he advances a thesis that following a rule is a skill or an ability to use certain expressions. This skill or ability is achieved from our training as the members of a community of language-users. The immediate reaction to the whole analysis of rule-following is that if the use-rules of language are based on the agreement of certain customs of a community of language-users without any objective constraints, then it amounts to saying that what we call 'truth' or 'falsity' is also grounded in such practices. The truth becomes a matter of agreement in judgements. Anticipating this problem, Wittgenstein asks: " So are you saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? - It is what human beings say in that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. This is not an agreement in opinions but in form of life."<sup>17</sup> The concept of 'form of life' plays a dominant role in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. A form of life as Wittgenstein describes it, is an underlying consensus of linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour, assumptions, traditions, practices, customs, natural propensities that are shared by the individuals as members of the community of language-users. All these aspects are presupposed in the language they use. In a way language is woven into the patterns of human activity. The meanings, thus, are conferred on the expressions by the shared linguistic practices of the members of a community.<sup>18</sup>

### III

The above account of Wittgenstein's analysis of rule-following

invites our attention on certain crucial issues that have to be viewed critically. First of all, the rule-following method employed in exact sciences like logic and mathematics cannot be extended to the matters related to human practices and customs. This is obvious from the analysis of rule-following advanced by Wittgenstein in his later writings. But it was Hume and logical positivists who made it clear that the methods employed in exact sciences cannot be employed in empirical sciences. Influenced by logico-mathematical model, Wittgenstein tried to develop a kind of 'logically perfect language' that can mirror the reality as it is. Then, it was the same Wittgenstein who launched a scathing attack on his views expressed in *TLP*. This is because Wittgenstein realised the fact that the problems of sociological nature cannot be given a logical cover. Thus, the analysis provided by Wittgenstein in later writings as regards the notion of rule-following is self-stultifying. No one ever ventured to reduce language to a mysterious rule-following activity, but "the mystery here is all in Wittgenstein's imagination!"<sup>19</sup> Secondly, if all the rules of language are somehow located in the customs or agreements or practices that are observed by a community of language users, then why should there be rules at all. One can simply say that our linguistic practices are based on the customs of a community than on any rules. Then, obeying a rule or disobeying a rule in this context does not arise. Another important thing to notice here is that majority of the interpreters of the later philosophy of Wittgenstein are of the opinion that the 'use-theory of meaning' - which is central to *PI* - advocated by Wittgenstein suggests that language has an autonomous status. But this view loses its ground once it is admitted that our linguistic practices are rooted in our pre-linguistic behaviour (customs, traditions, natural propensities etc.). Although Wittgenstein could put a Platonist at bay by countering his view, namely, the rules somehow exist independent of us, the dogmatic acceptance of customs as the real source of our linguistic practices completely ignores the ontological status or experimental phenomenology of such customs. Even a novice in the field of language learning looks for an apt justification of the use of a word before he starts using it. Apart from that, the use of an expression in language need not necessarily reveal its meaning as otherwise believed by Wittgenstein. For example, if a person wants to know the use of a hammer as a tool, one can give him a long list of its uses. But none of these uses gives us the meaning of the word 'hammer'. Thus, 'use' and 'meaning' are two different things.

Wittgenstein rules out the possibility of a putative language speaker following the rules of his own language on the ground that there is no criterion for him to check whether he is following a certain rule correctly. But the same applies to the community of language users in the sense that "How does the community tell us whether it is following a rule? The answer Wittgenstein gives us is: it cannot tell."<sup>20</sup> Then, in what way community's claim of following a rule is better than that of a putative private language user? Then, the paradox is not really solved. Wittgenstein's attempt to disprove Platonism is a vain attempt. Even if he has disproved it, he has not provided us with any viable alternative as his thesis is ridden with internal contradictions. The presuppositions on which his thesis rests are philosophically questionable. No one would ever say that I can speak language at my own will. One can do so in so far as it is intelligible to others. What makes language intelligible? Any attempt to answer this question may lead one to a vicious circle as no interpretation in this regard would be final and immutable.

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#### NOTES

1. As a matter of fact, *Notebooks 1914-16*, and *Prototractatus* are considered to be the drafts of *Tractatus*.
2. Wittgenstein used the term 'therapeutic' in its literal sense. According to him, the philosopher's treatment of a philosophical problem is like the treatment of an illness. In the process he defies all the conventions of formalism to adopt an informal approach which can dissolve a problem.
3. Here, the term 'grammatical' is not used in its ordinary sense of the term 'grammar' but is used to denote logic. To be more precise the 'logic of language' is like the logic of given linguistic practice.
4. Prior to taking up the issue whether understanding a language is a rule-governed activity, a brief note about Wittgenstein's analysis of the nature of understanding is necessary. According to him, understanding is not a mental

process as otherwise thought to be. To understand something means to master a technique. To master a technique means an ability to perform certain actions.

5. In *PI* Wittgenstein identifies 'meaning' with 'use'. Many a time they were used as synonyms in his later works.
6. Why it is often referred to as Platonism is that for Plato the 'Forms' are fixed, infallible structures that guide our actions in the world of phenomena. These 'Forms' (ideal structures) exist independent of us. Similarly, the rules (use-rules) that govern the structure of language have a unique essence and are independent of us. This analogy allows philosophers to use the term 'Platonism' as a label for rigid rule-following activity.
7. A 'language-game' is a 'form of life' that involves a practice of agreement on certain basic or foundational beliefs that give meanings to the usage of various expressions in our linguistic practices.
8. L.Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraphs. 218-19.
9. *Ibid.*, paragraph 20.
10. *Ibid.*, paragraphs: 191-192.
11. *Ibid.*, paragraph 85.
12. *Ibid.*, paragraph 198.
13. L.Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Basil Blackwell, p 132.
14. L.Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph.224.
15. " *On certainty*, paragraph 204.
16. " *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph 219.
17. *Ibid.*, paragraph 241.
18. *Ibid.*, paragraphs. 19,22,241.
19. J.N.Findlay, *Wittgenstein: A Critique*, RKP, 1984, p. 131.
20. A.C.Grayling, *Wittgenstein*, OUP, 1988, p. 111.