On the Interpretability of Rules

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Saul Krikpe's skeptical argument and skeptical solution concerning rule-following are quite well known (cf. Kripke 1982). As an interpretation of Wittgenstein's view, it seems to has a basis in Wittgenstein's writings such as the following remarks: "And how can it [a rule] guide us, when its expression can after all be interpreted by us both thus and otherwise? I.e. when all various regularities correspond to it" (Wittgenstein 1978, 347) It is in the spirit of such a passage that Kripke starts his own unusual reading of Wittgenstein's views on rule-following. In particular he considers the case that in teaching a rule such as 'addition' to a person, the number of examples actually shown is finite. Various rules would be compatible with such a finite number of examples. So there seems to be no reason to insist that the teacher teaches, or the pupil learns, a particular rule rather than any of the other possible rules. Against this, one may want to cite a fact which can be used to single out one particular regularity. But Kripke goes on to show that various possible candidates that may constitute such a fact are all wanting. Thus he concludes that there is no matter of the fact as to what an expression or rule means, a dire consequence that seems to obliterate meaning and even mental contents, his skeptical solution in terms of communal agreement notwithstanding.

In Kripke's argument, it is not only a single rule that is subject to different interpretations, but rather that, as Wittgenstein puts it, "However many rules you give me—I give a rule which justifies my employment of your rules" (Wittgenstein 1978, 79). Let us call the fact that a rule or a set of rules can be variously interpreted as the interpretability of rules. It would then seem that it plays an pernicious role in leading toward the obliteration of meaning. But Wittgenstein does not seem to take it that way, as attested by the following remarks: "But, that everything can (also) be *interpreted* as following, doesn't mean that everything is following" (Wittgenstein 1978, 414). Here he seems to suggest that there is a way of making the interpretability harmless, as long as it is seen in the right light. But how can something be interpreted as following a rule and yet it is not really following that rule? What is the distinction between the two cases?

To get a glimpse of what Wittgenstein has to say to questions like these, we may first look at two of the prominent attempts which want to save Wittgenstein from Kripke. They are those made by Cora Diamond and John McDowell. What Diamond wants to point out, as a way of avoiding Kripke's skeptical argument, is that when a person teaches, say, the rule of "adding 2" to a pupil, he does not mean to teach the pupil to do the impossible job of picking out, from among all the possibilities, the correct sequence. Rather, the success of the teaching depends very much on the pupil's uptakes and responses (Diamond 1991, 68-69). This seems to imply that the distinction between "being interpreted as following" and "is following" is to be made by appealing to the pupil's uptakes and responses. McDowell, on the other hand, criticizes Kripke for his "…mistaken idea that grasping a rule is always an interpretation" (McDowell 1998, 238), or "…the assumption …that the understanding on which I act when I obey an order must be an interpretation" (McDowell 1998, 236). Instead, "there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation" (Wittgenstein 1968, §201). Such a way of grasping a rule, according to McDowell, is made possible for a person by his being initiated into a practice (McDowell 1998, 238). Again, this seems to imply that the distinction between "being interpreted as following" and "is following" can be made by appealing to *practice.*

Now let us turn to Wittgenstein. He gives a gloss to the phenomenon that although we ordinarily do know the rule of "adding 2", we nevertheless think that what we are taught are compatible with different regularities. Thus he remarks that:

What happens is not that this symbol cannot be further interpreted, but: I do no interpreting. I do not interpret because I feel natural in the present picture. When I interpret, I step from one level of my thought to another.

If I see the thought symbol "from outside", I become conscious that it *could* be interpreted thus or thus; if it is a step in the course of my thoughts, then it is a stopping-place that is natural to me, and its further interpretability does not occupy (or trouble) me. As I have a railway time-table and use it without being concerned with the fact that a table can be interpreted in various ways. (Wittgenstein 1974,147)

It is then clear that, according to Wittgenstein, a rule can indeed be interpreted differently, when it is seen "from outside", or when we step from one level of our thought to another. But what is to see a rule "from outside" or to step from one level to another? The following from Wittgenstein seems quite suggestive: "What, in a complicated surrounding, we call 'following a rule' we should certainly not call that if it stood in isolation" (Wittgenstein 1978, 335). Equally suggestive is: "'Then according to you everybody could continue the series as he likes; and so infer *any*how!' In that case we shan't call it 'continuing the series' and also presumably not 'inference'" (Wittgenstein 1978, 80). If read together with the passage quoted before—"But, that everything can (also) be *interpreted* as following, doesn't mean that everything is following"—these two passages seems to be saying that following a rule has its complicated surrounding and that to interpret a rule in a "deviant" way is to rid of the rule of such a complicated surrounding, and without such a surrounding it is no longer counted as following the rule, interpretability notwithstanding. To look at the rule "from outside" would then be to isolate it from the needed surrounding.

But what then is the complicated surrounding of a rule? And what is it to isolate a rule from its complicated surrounding? "But *this* is important, namely that this reaction [to a rule], which is our guarantee of understanding, presupposes as a surrounding particular circumstances, particular forms of life and speech." (Wittgenstein 1978, 414) "As we employ the word 'order' and 'obey', gestures no less than words are intertwined in a net of multifarious relationships. If I am construing a simplified case, it is not clear whether I ought still to call the phenomenon 'ordering' and 'obeying'" (RFM, VI-48). The complicated surrounding thus includes particular circumstances, particular forms of life and speech, and even gestures. And if we keep in mind the complexity of a form of life, we may even just say that the surrounding of a

rule is the form of life in which it is embedded. What Diamond calls the (natural) uptakes and responses of a learner of rules would then be part of the surrounding. To have a feel about how much the complicated surrounding may encompass, let us look at a case discussed by Wittgenstein. After pointing out that we should not take whichever (deviant) way of counting as correct, Wittgenstein continues:

> For what we call "counting" is an important part of our life's activities. Counting and calculating are not—e.g.—simply a pastime. Counting (and that means: counting like *this*) is a technique that is employed daily in the most various operations of our lives. And that is why we learn to count as we do: with endless practice, with merciless exactitude; that is why it is inexorably insisted that we shall say "two" after "one", "three" after "two" and so on. (Wittgenstein 1978, 37)

In addition to significantly referring to techniques, this passage serves to indicate how a rule corresponding to a particular regularity is to be singled out or instilled in a child. Similarly, "And thinking and inferring (like *counting*) is of course bounded for us, not by an arbitrary definition, but by natural limits corresponding to the body of what can be called the role of thinking and inferring in our life" (Wittgenstein 1978, 80).

But then what is it to look at a rule "from outside"? From what we have said before, to see a rule "from outside" is to isolate the rule from its surrounding. But what more can we say about such an isolation? If it is the surrounding that enables us to regard one particular regularity as *the* regularity, then it is the same surrounding that enables the pupil to learn the particular regularity without having to choose from among all the possibilities. The latter is made possible, according to Diamond, by the pupil's uptakes and responses. The exclusion of such uptakes and responses would then account for, at least in part, the interpretability of a rules, and hence the reason why choosing from among all the possibilities seems inevitable, if one is to know how to follow a rule. We have mentioned some of the ingredients of the complicated surrounding of a rule. But what needs to be emphasized is that the ingredients are, to use Wittgenstein's words, "intertwined in a net of multifarious relationships' (Wittgenstein 1978, 352), a fact Diamond correctly stresses (Diamond 1989).

Our answer about what surrounding is excluded, when a rule is seen "from Outside", can in fact be generalized In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein makes the following remarks: "Our rules leave loop-holes, and the practice has to speak for itself" (Wittgenstein 1969, § 139). It is such practice which, on the one hand, helps to give content to a rule and, on the other hand, which is carried out without the guidance of rules. Practice in this sense is what one does or capable of doing, not what one thinks or is conscious of . It is what Kjell Johannessen calls pre-knowledge or foreknowledge (Johannessen1988, 357). What is especially important about such foreknowledge is that it helps to determine the meaning of a rule, as "[I]nterpretations by themselves do not determine meaning" (Wittgenstein 1968, § 198). Equally important is that foreknowledge cannot be fully captured by sentences or propositions. The significance of this can be brought out by looking at what can be termed sententialism, a position we can attribute to Donald Davidson.

As a way of avoid the inscrutability of reference, Hartry Field proposes that we take into consideration causal relation between a name or its use and what it refers to (cf. Davidson 2001, 235). But Davidson thinks that this maneuver would not work, for such a relation can be expressed by a sentence. And if any set of sentences can be differently interpreted, the addition of one more sentence would not change that, and hence the inscrutability of reference again. What Davidson does here is to take any connection between the use of a term and what it refers to as expressible in sentences, hence he is taken to be holding the position of sententialism. The sententialism with respect to rule-following would take any connection between (an expression of) a rule and acts the rule dictates as completely expressible in sentences. It then follows from those well known facts (such as those one may find in model theory) that those sentences are individually or collectively subject to different interpretations. Sententialism would then correspond to seeing a rule "from outside". And what sententialism excludes is the existence of foreknowledge, or practice when it is carefully delimited. But if practice or foreknowledge is what determines the meaning of a rule, then sententialism can at best be entertained as an abstraction, if it indeed can be so entertained at all.

The sort of sententialism held by Davidson also has similar difficulties. If interpretation by itself does not determine the meaning of a rule, then a set of sentences do not determine their own meaning either. It may be said that it is their use that gives them meaning. And if Wittgenstein is right, their use had better be something like what we call foreknowledge or practice. When sententialism is taken for granted, though the interpretability of the set of sentences, with its existence as an abstraction, is guaranteed, the meaning of the set of sentences may still be out of sight. With this in mind, views such as the thesis of the indeterminacy and the thesis of the inscrutability of reference may need a second critical look.

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