

# The Private Language Argument and the Analogy between Rules and Grounds

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Anti-Kripkean interpretations of the central sections of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations (PI)* enjoy a better exegetical reputation than Kripke's interpretation in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language (WRPL)*. Section 202, however, is something of an embarrassment for many of those interpretations. Recall what it says:

And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.

The main problem for anti-Kripkean interpretations is to make sense of this early appearance of the notion of privacy, for many of them only detect an argument involving (the standard understanding of) this notion beginning at 258. Thus, for example, Colin McGinn's influential *Wittgenstein on Meaning (WM)* claims that in 202 'private' does not mean "unknowable to others" or any concept involving "the others", but must have a non-standard meaning.

I will begin by stressing some exegetical tensions of anti-Kripkean approaches, taking McGinn's as a useful foil in this brief presentation. (But related tensions appear in other anti-Kripkeans.) After that, I will identify one neglected source of support for a broadly Kripkean interpretation: the analogy between rules and epistemic grounds and the existence

of a Kripkean anti-privacy argument about epistemic grounds in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (*OC*).

Recall that Kripke sees in *PI* an argument for the “non-factuality” of attributions like ‘I am following a rule (in doing such and such)’ and ‘Jones is following a rule (in doing such and such)’. The basic Kripkean assumption is that, if the fact that I am following a rule (in doing such and such) exists, it must consist in part of an item that is non-conjecturally, “directly accessible” to me (*WRPL*, 40) and that “shows how I am justified” (*WRPL*, 11) (in doing such and such). A “mental expression” of the rule is “multiply interpretable” and cannot by itself be such an item, unless it consists of other “mental expressions” in whose employment I am following corresponding rules (*WRPL*, 15-17). These may in turn consist of other “mental expressions”, but at some point this chain of “mental expressions” must end and I must find some that guide my applications of the initial rule, either by themselves, which is impossible on account of their “multiple interpretability”, or through some other kind of associated items. However, a search through “directly accessible” candidates like sensations, impressions, images, etc. yields the result that there is really no item that justifies me in my alleged applications of a rule in new cases. The presence in my mind of any of the “directly accessible” items I can think of is compatible with infinitely many ways of acting in response to them. It is good to note that, given the basic Kripkean assumption, consideration of alleged “items” which are not “directly accessible”, like dispositions, long term behavioral regularities, etc., is effectively irrelevant (see, e.g., *WRPL*, 24 and 52 n. 34), even though Kripke gives them some attention. Kripke concludes that rule-following attributions do not describe facts.

They do have assertability conditions, however. Simplifying a lot,

(R) I am following a rule (in doing *a*)

is assertable by me when I think I am following a rule (in doing *a*), and ‘Jones is following a rule (in doing *a*)’ is assertable by Smith when Smith sees Jones behaving in some way that seems rule-guided to Smith. According to Kripke, all these elements are already in place by *PI* 202. In this section Wittgenstein simply claims that (R) and

(R\*) I think I am following a rule (in doing *a*)

cannot be distinguished unless one postulates that my use of them is not “private”, i.e., that it can be evaluated by others in such a way that they can in principle disagree with my assertion (R). (R) and (R\*) have the same assertability conditions, and in view of the non-factualist argument, they cannot be distinguished by pointing to two different facts they stand for. (R) and (R\*) can be distinguished, however, when one observes that they are evaluable by others, who can in principle disagree with my assertion (R). (In these evaluations the others would use third-person attributions (and their negations).) Kripke also claims that in 258ff. Wittgenstein simply makes a particular application of these general points, now against an objector who seeks to find appropriate “directly accessible” guiding items for the use of sensation-words in so-called ‘private ostensive definitions’.

According to McGinn, by *PI* 202 Wittgenstein has only excluded that the rule-following fact must consist of a “directly accessible” item of the sort primarily considered in Kripke’s argument. And Wittgenstein not only has not put forward a non-factualist argument, but has clearly stated that (R) stands (when true) for the fact that I exemplify a certain behavioral regularity *BR* (“when a person follows a signpost (say), his behaviour *is* his rule-following” (*WM*, 36)). However, he has not excluded the possibility that *BR* may

be a private regularity, one consisting of private behavior, unknowable to others. This is excluded in 258, whose conclusion is supposed to be that *BR* must be a regularity whose existence is checkable by others. In 202 Wittgenstein uses ‘private’ non-standardly as synonymous with ‘infallible’, and simply argues that (R) does not stand for something I can know to hold infallibly, as I would if it stood for the fact that I have a certain sensation, or “impression”, etc. (*WM*, 44). According to McGinn, by 202 Wittgenstein has made no claim that allows him to extract a conclusion involving “the others”.

I believe these theses should be considered as at least as controversial as Kripke’s. The assimilation of Wittgenstein’s “practices” to mere behavioral regularities is highly doubtful (to say the least) in view of sections such as *PI* 200, 222 and 232. Also, sections like 217 seem to exclude an interpretation under which the rule-following fact need not intuitively consist at least in part of a “directly accessible” guiding item. Furthermore, 201 clearly introduces implicit talk of “the others” when it speaks of my following a rule being *exhibited* (to whom but others?) in what *we* call ‘obeying the rule’ (surely that’s not a majestic plural). And the postulation of a use of ‘private’ in 202 that has nothing to do with “the others” is manifestly *ad hoc*.

In any case, McGinn has problems also with *PI* 258. Here Wittgenstein is supposed to conclude *tacitly* that only non-private *behavioral regularities* (in the use of signs) are cases of rule-following (*WM*, 48). But on the face of it, in 258 Wittgenstein is simply saying that a “private ostensive definition” is no better than essentially similar things like “mental expressions”, “impressions”, etc. as a candidate “directly accessible” guiding or justifying item. And the *explicit* conclusion is that if that’s all I have to go by then there is no distinction between my following a rule and my thinking that I am following one. The conclusion of 258 doesn’t mention *regularities* at all, and in fact the argued

inappropriateness of a “private ostensive definition” is clearly *compatible* with my exemplifying a certain behavioral regularity (private or not). The passage’s only clear claim is that “private ostensive definitions” cannot be the basis for the required distinguishability; it certainly does not support a regularity exegesis.

Even more problematic for McGinn’s interpretation is the fact that it must (and does) also appeal to a *tacit premise* in its reconstruction of 258. Specifically, it must and does appeal to a verificationist premise, one that demands that somebody can in principle tell that the *regularity* exemplified by a rule-follower obtains. McGinn’s acknowledgment that such a premise is needed actually confirms the compatibility of the *explicit* contents of 258 with my being a rule-follower because of my exemplifying a regularity. Of course, if my being a rule-follower because of my exemplifying a non-verifiable regularity is excluded by McGinn’s tacit premise, then all that is left given his previous reading of Wittgenstein is my being a rule-follower because of my exemplifying a verifiable, hence public regularity, and that’s McGinn’s conclusion. But it seems clear to me that too much *tacitness* is needed for this reading to seem convincing.

Given all these serious problems, one might hope for evidence for the alternative Kripkean reading. In what remains I will describe the announced positive considerations in favor of a Kripkean reconstruction of Wittgenstein’s private language argument. They are based on the analogy between rules and epistemic grounds. There is at least one use of ‘to know’ under which it is a basic intuitive requisite on my knowing that *p* that I have an (epistemic) ground for believing that *p*. This use is singled out by Wittgenstein when he says that “One says “I know” when one is ready to give compelling grounds. “I know” relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth” (OC 243). The attributions (R) and

(K) I know that  $p$

share the feature that part of their intuitive content is given by an existential claim: ‘There is a ground I have (for believing that  $p$ )’ in the epistemic case, and ‘There is a rule I follow (in doing  $a$ )’ in the rule case. Further, in both cases we speak intuitively of the relation between ground and believing and the relation between rule and application as relations of “justification”, understanding this term in a demanding epistemic way in the former case and in a broad way in the latter case.

More importantly for present concerns, in both cases my consideration of candidate justificatory items requires and involves a regress of justifications, but “justifications come to an end somewhere”, to use a Wittgensteinian phrase (see *PI* 217 for the rules case and *OC* 204 for the epistemic case). In the epistemic case this means that, although the justificatory power of items such as the propositions that allegedly ground my belief that  $p$  depends intuitively on their being themselves justified by other grounds, in fact I must reach a point where the ensuing regress is stopped; at that point I will be faced with a groundless proposition or similar item. These items that are intuitively taken to be grounds (propositions, arguments, etc.) do not have justificatory power in themselves (without grounds for them). Nor have any such power other items that are not even grounds from an intuitive point of view, and that seem justificatorily inert also from a philosophical point of view (such as sensations, “impressions”, etc.). Given all this, my belief that  $p$  is revealed as ultimately “blind”.

In the rules case Wittgenstein and Kripke note that, although the justificatory power of items such as the “mental expressions” of rules depends intuitively on my having other items by means of which I can justify my applications of them, in fact I must reach a point

where the ensuing regress is stopped; at that point I will be faced with an item in the application of which I am not further guided by any other item. Given the additional observation that these items are essentially like sensations or “impressions”, etc., that they do not have any justificatory power by themselves, my “application” of any of these items will ultimately be “blind”. Very significantly, Wittgenstein himself points out that the rules case is analogous to the epistemic case in this regard (see *OC* 510-511, 111, 307).

These “end of justifications” arguments by themselves raise two analogous questions. When I perform a certain behavior *a* that is really blind even if it would intuitively be described as an application of a rule, (Q1) why am I following a rule by performing *a*, and not simply acting in what should apparently be described as a blind way, merely thinking that I am following a rule? When I accept a certain proposition *p* that is really accepted blindly by me even if it would intuitively be described as known or justifiably believed by me, (Q2) why do I know that *p*, and not simply embrace *p* with a simple sureness that should apparently be described as blind, merely thinking with sufficient certainty that I know that *p*? These questions have closely related counterparts in questions about attributions or assertions: (Q1’) how, in the first case, does my assertion (R) substantively differ from my assertion (R\*)? (Q2’) how, in the second case, does my assertion (K) substantively differ from my assertion (K\*)?

(K\*) I am certain that *p*.

One connection between (Q1) and (Q1’) and between (Q2) and (Q2’) is worthy of note: for someone who takes the “end of justifications” arguments to establish a non-factualist conclusion *and* the identity in assertability conditions of (R) and (R\*) and of (K) and (K\*),

(Q1') is a rigorous way of asking (Q1), and (Q2') a rigorous way of asking (Q2). (Of course, all these questions can be asked by a factualist as well.)

According to McGinn, Wittgenstein's answer to (Q1') is that (R) (when true) describes the fact that I exemplify a certain behavioral regularity of which *a* is an instance, while (R\*) doesn't. If this interpretation is correct, one might expect Wittgenstein's answer to (Q2') to be that (K) (when true) describes the fact that I exemplify a certain behavioral regularity of which my accepting that *p* is an instance. Presumably this regularity would consist in my habitual acceptance of propositions similar to *p* in some relevant respect: propositions which are true, or likely to be true, or—more plausibly—consequences of the same kind of intuitive grounds, etc. (K\*), however, describes an uninteresting psychological fact.

On the other hand, Kripke's Wittgenstein's answer to (Q1') is that (R) and (R\*) do not differ in their describing different facts; and they don't differ in assertability conditions either, for I really have no criterion to go by that allows me to distinguish the case in which I am following a rule from the case in which I am not. They differ in that others could in principle disagree with my assertion (R) (but not with my assertion (R\*)); if they agree with (R), this together with the fact that they could have disagreed implies that, even when they are both assertable, (R) and (R\*) differ substantively. If this interpretation is correct, one might expect Wittgenstein's answer to (Q2') to be that (K) and (K\*) differ in that others can in principle disagree with my assertion (K) (but not with my assertion (K\*)); if they agree with it, this together with the fact that they could have disagreed implies that, even when they are both assertable, (K) and (K\*) differ substantively.

Wittgenstein's answer to (Q2') in *OC* seems to be the one that we might expect from the Kripkean analogy:

245. To whom does anyone say that he knows something? To himself, or to someone else. If he says it to himself, how is it distinguished from the assertion that he is *sure* that things are like that? There is no subjective sureness that I know something. The certainty is subjective, but not the knowledge. So if I say “I know that I have two hands”, and that is not supposed to express just my subjective certainty, I must be able to satisfy myself that I am right. But I can’t do that, for my having two hands is not less certain before I have looked at them than afterwards. (...) 250. My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it. 251. Doesn’t this mean: I shall proceed according to this belief unconditionally, and not let anything confuse me? 252. But it isn’t just that *I* believe in this way that I have two hands, but that every reasonable person does. 253. At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded. 254. Any ‘reasonable’ person behaves like *this*.

Wittgenstein’s answer is significant in several respects. First, it implicates that (K) and (K\*) do not differ in that the former describes a behavioral regularity of mine and the latter doesn’t. In the epistemic case it is clear—and nobody seems to have thought otherwise—that Wittgenstein is not tempted by any regularity or related view (see *OC* 135, 172). Consequently, he uncontroversially doesn’t use any premise about the *verifiability of regularities*. Unfortunately, as we saw, in the rules case his claims about “practices” may be superficially interpreted as supporting a regularity view.

Second, Wittgenstein implicates, as the Kripkean analogy would lead one to expect, that the difference does not lie at the level of assertability conditions. In fact, Wittgenstein seems to infer from the “end of justifications” argument condensed in *OC* 245 (the proposition that I have two hands is for me a groundless proposition) that (K) and (K\*) have essentially the same assertability conditions. And the fact that Wittgenstein poses the

interesting distinguishability question in the form of (Q2'), and does not answer it straightforwardly by pointing to two different facts that (K) and (K\*) stand for, of course strongly suggests that he presupposes a non-factualist view of epistemic attributions.

Third, Wittgenstein clearly points to the difference lying in what happens when what I say is not said 'to myself', i.e., in what happens when it is said to *others*. And he states that the difference lies in that others agree with me as to the acceptability of the relevant groundless proposition; of course, since this would be no difference unless they could in principle disagree, it is implied that it is these two circumstances together that distinguish (K) from (K\*).

Fourth, Wittgenstein's anti-privacy argument in *OC* is a completely general argument ("to whom does anyone say that he knows *something?*"), not one about a specific kind of propositions or of intuitive epistemic grounds (much less one about a specific kind of regularities in my behavior of accepting propositions). This supports the Kripkean view that the basic anti-privacy argument in *PI* is general, and not one about the specific kind of alleged justificatory items called 'private ostensive definitions'.

Of course, these points require a more extended discussion than I can offer within the set time limits. However, I hope that even this sketchy presentation may cast some doubt over prevalent anti-Kripkean readings of *PI* 202, as well as suggest that a Kripkean reconstruction may be more Wittgensteinian than is commonly thought.