Can One Grasp Propositions Without Knowing a Language?

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RESUMEN

Wittgenstein y Brandom dicen que el conocimiento de un lenguaje consiste en la propia capacidad de pensar. Además, dicen que el lenguaje es una actividad esencialmente pública de modo que conocer un lenguaje y ser capaz de pensar consisten en estar inmerso en una práctica pública de algún género. Wittgenstein da dos famosos argumentos a favor de esto: sus argumentos del "lenguaje privado" y sobre "seguir una regla" y Brandom se limita a desarrollarlos. En este artículo argumento que el punto de vista de Wittgenstein-Brandom nos priva de la posibilidad de querer decir algo mediante algo. En realidad, priva en absoluto a cualquiera de la capacidad de pensar; este punto de vista es realmente una versión de la psicología pauloviana del estímulo-respuesta y comparte todas sus deficiencias. Se intenta mostrar que el argumento sobre seguir una regla no es otra cosa que el fracaso en tomar en cuenta el hecho de que, en ciertos contextos, los operadores epistémicos pueden tener alcance largo o corto respecto de otros operadores. El argumento del lenguaje privado, se intenta mostrar, está basado en el fallo en distinguir entre las condiciones que son causalmente necesarias para un lenguaje y las que son constitutivas de él. El argumento de Brandom involucra una extensión excesiva del concepto de "comunidad lingüística". El resultado es que su punto de vista se convierte en trivial: cualquiera que pueda hablar o pensar es por definición un miembro de una comunidad lingüística, de modo que la "demostración" de Brandom de que sólo los seres culturizados pueden pensar se convierte en un artefacto de su propia definición.

ABSTRACT

Wittgenstein and Brandom both say that knowledge of a language constitutes one's ability to think. Further, they say that a language is an essentially public entity: so to know a language, and to be able to think, consist in one's being embedded in a public practice of some kind. Wittgenstein provides two famous arguments for this: his "private-language" and "rule-following" arguments. Brandom develops these arguments. In this paper, I argue that the Wittgenstein-Brandom view strips anyone of the ability to mean anything by anything. Indeed, it strips anyone of the ability to think at all; the Wittgenstein-Brandom view is really just a version of Pavlov's stimulus-response psychology, and shares all its deficiencies. The rule-following argument is shown to be nothing more than a failure to register the fact that, in certain contexts, epistemic operators can be given either wide or narrow scope with respect to other operators. The private-language argument is shown to be based on a failure to distin-

guish the conditions that are causally necessary for language from those that are constitutive of it. Brandom's argument involves a massive over-extension of the concept of a "linguistic community". The result is that his view becomes trivial: anything that can speak or think is by definition a member of a linguistic community; so Brandom's "demonstration" that only encultured beings can think turns out to be an artifact of his definitions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Intelligence might be thought of as the ability to see the bearing that propositions have on other propositions. Because you know a language, you grasp many propositions that you wouldn't grasp if you didn't know a language. So knowing a language unquestionably enhances one's intelligence.

There are two competing hypotheses as to why this is so:

(i) Knowledge of a language *constitutes* one's grasp of propositions. So there *is* no grasp of propositions, and thus no intelligence, before one knows a language.

(ii) We can grasp propositions *without* knowing a language. Knowledge of a language makes one more intelligent by facilitating operations on propositions that one *already* grasps (this was Frege's view).

Perhaps the most influential advocate of (i) is the later Wittgenstein. Many think that his private language and rule-following arguments constitute devastating criticisms of (ii) and thus make it necessary to accept (i). In the eyes of many contemporary philosophers, cognitive science must be rejected in its entirety, given Wittgenstein's arguments.

According to some cognitive scientists [Fodor (1975), Dennett (1978) and Pylyshin (1984)], we grasp propositions through some internal mental code, through some "private language". And that private language is our only way of grasping propositions. According to *all* cognitive scientists, information can be grasped *privately*: a *public* language or system of symbolism is not (always) used. Wittgenstein argued that both of these views are quite false. There can be no private language. But there can be no grasp of information *except* through a language. So information is always grasped through a *public* language. Many philosophers agree with Wittgenstein on both counts. So many philosophers think

that cognitive science is simply nonsense [See McDowell (1994), (1998); see also Baker and Hacker (1984)].

Robert Brandom agrees that there is no thinking — indeed, no mental representation of any kind [Brandom (1998), p. 151] — without knowledge of a public language. And he also thinks that the *basis* for a cogent defense of this thesis lies in Wittgenstein's arguments. But Brandom thinks that some additions must be made to Wittgenstein's arguments. Brandom makes what he believes are the necessary additions.

The purpose of this paper is to argue for three points. Wittgenstein's arguments fail. Brandom's arguments fail. And we grasp propositions directly: no language need be involved.

II. WITTGENSTEIN: AN OVERVIEW

Why does Wittgenstein think that, as a matter of principle, one must know a language to grasp propositions? His reasons lie in two arguments he gives: the so-called "rule-following" and "private language" arguments[1]. Before I give these arguments themselves, let me say what they are supposed to show.

II.1 *What the rule-following argument is supposed to show*

The rule-following argument is supposed to show this: to grasp a proposition — to grasp a meaning — is *not* to behold some platonic entity. It is to have certain *dispositions*.

The conventional picture is this. Bob (an arbitrary person) hears a certain sequence of noises, say: "the building is on fire!" In themselves, the noises are meaningless: they are just noises. But Bob associates them with a certain kind of abstract or platonic object: what philosophers call a *proposition.* Of course, in this case, the proposition in question is: *there is a fire in the building.* Once Bob has assigned a proposition to those hitherto dead noises, he has been told something. This information interacts with Bob's existing beliefs and desires. As a result, Bob forms new beliefs and desires. He forms the belief that if he is to survive, he must call the fire-department. Bob does want to survive. So he forms a desire to call the fire-department. As a result, he does call the fire department. To sum up, mediating between stimulus and response — between hearing the noises "there is a fire in the building" and pushing certain buttons on a certain telephone — are various internal cognitive processes.

Wittgenstein thinks that the story just told is a myth. It *seems* to have content. But it doesn't. The terms involved in the story — "platonic objects", "inter-

nal cognitive processes" — are just labels, ways of covering up ignorance, like Moliere's "dormitive virtue". To understand the noise "there is a fire in the building" is *not* to associate it with some platonic entity. The required platonic entity doesn't exist. And even if it did exist, it would play no part in the course of events just described. Therefore, the subsequent internal processes posited by the story just told don't really exist. For those processes would involve the examination of these non-existent, or at best irrelevant, platonic entities [Wittgenstein (1958) §§ 136-200; (1974) §§ 45-51].

According to Wittgenstein, no act of proposition-manipulation mediates between Bob's hearing the sound "there is a fire in the building" and Bob's subsequent action (calling the fire department). Bob hears; Bob reacts. There are no intervening manipulations of representations, no internal juggling of platonic forms [Wittgenstein (1958) §§ 136-200; (1974) §§ 93-111]. Of course, Bob does *understand* the noises he hears ("there is a fire in the building"). Wittgenstein doesn't deny this. But this understanding consists *not* in Bob's examining various platonic entities. It consists in his *reacting* the right way.

To sum up, understanding consists not in grasping platonic forms; it consists not in dark internal manipulations of abstract objects. It consists in having the right dispositions [Wittgenstein (1958) §§ 138-228; (1974) §§ 5-111].

II. 2 *What the private language argument is supposed to show*

The private-language argument is supposed to show this: Having the right dispositions is *necessary* to knowing a language. But it is not sufficient. One must have these dispositions in a certain cultural context. One has to exercise these dispositions in the context of a certain kind of public practice. If one is suitably embedded in such a practice, *then* one knows a language.

III. THE ARGUMENTS

Now we will state the arguments just discussed.

III.1 *The Rule-Following Argument.*

Consider the rule: $F(x)=x^2$. Let R_1 be our short-hand for that rule.

Obviously a person can grasp this rule. (You grasp it. I grasp it.) But what is it to grasp this rule?

The traditional answer is this: to grasp that rule is to behold a certain kind a platonic object of some kind. As we've seen, Wittgenstein rejects this answer. Here is his argument.

R_1 applies to infinitely many different cases. (There are infinitely many values of 'x'.) People grasp R_1. But one couldn't possibly be aware of *every* application of this rule. You've probably never thought about F(256). So you've never been aware of this particular application of that function. And even if you have, there are infinitely others you have not thought about or therefore been aware of. So grasping the rule $F(x) = x^2$ cannot consist in one's being aware of *all* of these applications.

But if somebody asks me, 'what is F(256)?', I must know how to generate the right answer. I must know how to *apply* R_1 to this new case. I can grasp R_1 without knowing straight off what F(256) is. But I must know how to *generate* that value; I must know how to *apply* R_1 to that case. Otherwise I do not grasp that rule.

If am to know how to apply R_1 to some specific case, I must surely know some *principle* or *rule* that relates R_1 to that case. Grasping R_1 involves being able to apply it in a *principled* way — not a haphazard or random way — to different values of 'x'. And this involves knowing some principle or *rule* that relates R_1 to those new cases. So if I am to apply R_1 in a principled way to F(256), then I must do it in accordance with some rule — call it R_2.

Everything we said about R_1 is true of R_2. To grasp R_2, I must know how to apply it. But I must know how to apply it in some *principled* way. So I must know some principle or *rule* — call it R_3 — that says how it is to be applied.

Thus we have generated a regress. For any rule R_n, grasping R_n involves knowing how to apply it. Knowing how to apply it involves knowing some rule R_{n+1}. Thus one couldn't grasp a single rule unless one had *already* grasped infinitely many rules.

Let us sum up. According to the traditional picture, to grasp a rule is to behold some kind of hyper-real object. Embedded in that picture is some kind of vicious regressiveness and, therefore, some kind of incoherence [Wittgenstein (1958) §§ 138-238; (1974) §§ 5-111].

Here is another way that Wittgenstein argues for the point just mentioned. (I leave it open whether this is a different version of the argument just given or a whole new argument.) In itself, a symbol[2] (e.g. the inscription "$F(x) = x^2$") is meaningless. Symbols are given meaning by being interpreted. For the sake of argument, suppose one could behold propositions the way one can behold inscriptions and noises. Suppose one could *behold* the rule $F(x) = x^2$ the way one can behold the inscription "$F(x) = x^2$". In that case, that rule would be meaningless *until* it was interpreted: just as the inscription "$F(x) = x^2$" is dead before it is interpreted, so that *rule* would be dead before being interpreted.

Anything we can grasp with one of the five senses — any inscription, any noise — is meaningless *before* it is interpreted. If we grasped things through some *sixth* sense, *those* things would be meaningless before they were interpreted. Suppose we hold the traditional view — we say that grasping the meaning of "$F(x) = x^2$" consists in our beholding some platonic entity. In that case, we are really saying that to grasp that rule is to behold some object through a sixth sense. So the traditional view merely replaces *one* meaningless object (an inscription) with *another* meaningless object (a platonic archetype). It thus fails to show how any meaning was grasped.[3]

Everything we've just said about rules applies to propositions. This is because propositions *are* rules. Consider the proposition *Bob plays piano.* This is (let us suppose) true. But there are counter-factual circumstances where it is false. So this proposition might be thought of as a function or rule: one that assigns truth to certain circumstances (or worlds) and falsity to others. Just as $F(x) = x^2$ assigns 4 to 2 and 9 to 3, so *Bob plays piano* assigns *truth* to this world and *falsity* to other worlds.

Some propositions (e.g. *triangles have three sides*) assign truth to *all* worlds, and others (e.g. *triangles have four sides*) assign falsity to all worlds. But such propositions are still rules or functions: they are *constant* functions.

Let us apply what we said about rules to propositions.[4] The traditional view is that grasping a proposition consists in grasping some platonic object. But that idea is viciously regressive and thus incoherent. Whatever it is to grasp a proposition, it is not to behold some platonic — some hyper-real — object.

Also, if propositions *were* hyper-real objects, and we beheld them through some sixth-sense, they would *themselves* have to be interpreted; they would be just like noises or inscriptions — meaningless *until* interpreted. So positing such objects does nothing to illuminate the phenomenon of understanding.[5]

There are a few more points to make about the rule-following argument. But let us now state the private language argument; this will help put into context the remaining points about the rule-following argument.

III.2 *The Private Language Argument*

What is a language? A language is a set of *rules*: rules that govern the usage of expressions. Among the rules constituting English is this: it is permissible to use the sentence "snow is white" just in case snow is white. (If one breaks this rule, one has spoken falsely.)

Suppose there were no rules governing when some expression E could be used. So *any* use of E is correct. In that case, E would be meaningless. It would

be equally consistent with any state of affairs. An utterance of E wouldn't tell anyone anything.

What makes an expression meaningful is that there are rules prohibiting certain uses of it. Thus a language is a set of rules that (inter alia) *prohibit* the use of certain usages of certain expressions. A "language" didn't prohibit any usage of any expression wouldn't be a language at all.

In *some* sense of the term "private language", it is clear that there can be private languages. Suppose I wish to keep a diary, and I want to make sure that only I understand what I've written. I might create a private code. I might invert word order (so I write "wons" instead of "snow") or I might assign a number to each letter. What is going on here is that I am taking an existing *public* language and *translating* it into some new language: a language only I know. Wittgenstein admits that there can be private languages in *this* sense [Wittgenstein (1958) § 243]. When he says there can be no "private language" he means the following.

Suppose Bob doesn't speak *any* language. But Bob tries to create a new language. (Call it L.) He tries to do this single-handedly: he doesn't do it with the help of others. Let us suppose Bob starts by mentally stipulating that "blark" means *snow*, that "bleb" means *green*, and so on.

If Bob should forget those rules, those words would immediately cease to have meaning. How can Bob guarantee that he won't forget them? Perhaps he might write them down. But in order to interpret what he's written down, Bob must *remember* those rules. If those written records are to be at all useful, Bob must *remember* the very semantic rules that they bear. Ultimately, Bob must simply *remember* the semantic rules of L. His memory of those rules is his only touchstone. But not only is his memory his only *guide* as to what sentences of his private language means; his memory is what *preserves* those semantic rules. When it vanishes, so do they.

Let us talk about *public* rules for a moment; and then we will come back to Bob. If somebody misuses or misinterprets an expression belonging to a public language, there are consequence. If I don't stop when the sign says "stop", I will be given a ticket. If I say, "I want vanilla" when I mean: *I want chocolate*, I will not be given what I want.

As we noted, a language is a set of rules that *prohibit* certain uses of certain expressions. Misusage of expressions is enforced by certain penalties; one is given vanilla, not chocolate; one is punched, not hugged. An unenforced rule is as good as *no* rule. If nobody was ever given a ticket (or otherwise punished) for going through a red light, then in effect there would *be* no rule prohibiting doing so. Rules exist only when penalties exist.

In light of all this, let us turn our attention back to Bob. Suppose Bob *breaks* one of the semantic rules of L. What penalty will there be? Because L is, by hypothesis, a *private* language, there is *at most* one person who will know when Bob is breaking a semantic rule of L. That person is Bob.

How will Bob know that he has broken such a rule? He cannot consult other people. If he wrote down those semantic rules, he could consult what he'd written. But his interpretation of those writings would only be as good as his recollection of the very rules they encode. So, ultimately, Bob has nothing to go on other than his own *recollection* as to what those rules are. He has only his own *opinion.*

As a matter of logic, Bob cannot possibly consider his own opinion to be wrong. If somebody considers a view to be wrong, then that view is not that person's opinion. So Bob will *always* think he is using L in the right way. If anyone is to enforce correct usage of L, it is Bob. But Bob will never believe his own usage to be wrong.

So Bob's usage of L is completely unregulated. He can use any expression of L in any way he wants. There will never be any penalty. The semantic rules of L are completely unenforced; so they permit *any* usage of *any* expression.

But in that case the expressions belonging to L must be completely meaningless. If any expression of L can be used in any way at all, then its expression means nothing.

A language is a set of semantic rules. The fact that L is private means that its semantic rules are unenforceable. In effect, an unenforceable rule is *no* rule. So a private language is no language. Thus, there can be no private language (in the relevant sense) [Wittgenstein (1958) §§ 234-334].

III. 3 *Rule-following revisited*
Now that we've outlined the private-language argument, we can complete our exposition of the rule-following argument.

Linguistic rules must be public. This is what the private-language argument shows. But what is true of linguistic rules is true of *all* rules. There must be a difference between obeying a rule and breaking it. If a rule permits *anything*, then it is no rule at all [Wittgenstein (1958) §§ 201-208]. A private rule is an unenforced rule. There is no difference between obeying it and breaking it [Wittgenstein (1958) § 199]. So there is no such thing as a private rule.

For the sake of argument, suppose Bob *privately* grasps the rule $F(x) = x^2$. (He grasps it. But he is not a part of a society or, therefore, of any public practice.) Bob will always think he is interpreting that rule correctly. Nothing *independent* of Bob's thinking will regulate his thinking. Bob can apply $F(x) = x^2$ in

any way he wants. That rule doesn't regulate his thinking. But to grasp a rule just *is* to be regulated, in one's thinking, by that rule. So, contrary to our supposition, Bob does *not* grasp $F(x) = x^2$.

It is self-contradictory to suppose that a rule might be grasped privately. Thus, to grasp a rule, one must be a part of some *public* practice. One grasps a rule only if that rule regulates one thinking. A rule regulates one's thinking only if the rule is enforced. A private rule is unenforceable. *Other people* enforce rules. So grasping a rule involves being embedded in some kind of public practice.

III. 4 *Wittgenstein's Arguments Synthesized*

Let us now put all these ideas together. To grasp a rule is *not* to behold some platonic object. It is to have certain dispositions. Rules are public. To grasp a rule is to be a part of a *public* practice. It is to have certain dispositions in a certain kind of cultural context. A language is a set of rules. Therefore, to grasp a language is to grasp rules. Therefore, to know a language is to have certain dispositions in a cultural context.

We can now see why, in Wittgenstein's view, knowledge of language underlies one's ability to grasp propositions. Propositions are rules. Rules cannot be grasped privately. Rules are grasped by being part of a *public* practice. So propositions are grasped, if at all, by being part of a public practice of some kind. What *kind* of public practice is involved? A public practice involving the use of *symbols*.

If participation in *any* public practice constitutes a grasp of propositions, it is participation in the practice of using symbols. No other public practice would serve this function. To grasp a proposition is to engage in *some* kind of public practice. So to grasp a proposition is to engage in the practice of using symbols. Thus knowledge of language *constitutes* one's grasp of propositions. There is no grasping propositions or meanings without knowing a language (a *public* language).[6]

III. 5 *Brandom's views*

Brandom's views *almost* coincide with Wittgenstein's. First of all, Brandom accepts the private-language and rule-following arguments. And he accepts the consequences of those doctrines that we just described [Brandom (1998), pp. 18-22]. But Brandom goes beyond Wittgenstein.[7] According to Brandom, for a creature to know a language, it is *necessary* that it have certain dispositions. But it isn't *sufficient*. A zombie might have the right dispositions: he might be disposed to make the sounds "have a nice day" and "look out below!" in just the right circumstances. And he might have those dispositions in the right cultural context. But zombies

don't understand anything. So having those dispositions in that kind of context is not *sufficient* for understanding those expressions [Brandom (1998), pp. 40-1].

What else is needed? To understand Brandom's answer to this, we must consider a provocative point that he makes. Because he accepts the private language argument, Brandom holds that only *groups* of people can have language. From this, Brandom concludes that only whole groups of people *know* languages. What Brandom means is not that each member of a group *individually* knows a language. He means that the group, considered as a single entity, knows English or Spanish or Russian [Brandom (1998), pp. 34-6].

Consider the class of people who speak English. Brandom says: it is this class *as a whole* that knows English. (In any case, what knows English is *some* group — never an individual.[8]) Smith, Jones, and Brown know English only in a derivative sense.

He thinks that this is a straightforward consequence of the private language argument: an argument he accepts. The private language argument shows that, as a matter of conceptual necessity, there must be several people if there is to be a language. One person is not enough. *A fortiori* there must be several people if a language is to be *known*. The "must" here denotes conceptual, not causal, necessity. Once it is granted that knowledge of a language is *conceptually* dependent on the existence of a group, as opposed to a single person, it is then a short step to saying that it is the group that knows the language, and not any of its members taken individually.

Brandom takes this short step: he holds that it is really whole communities that know languages. Individuals know them only in a second-class sense.[9] Obviously no *individual* wins a soccer match. Only a whole team can do so. A member of a team can win a match in, at most, a secondary sense. Brandom holds that individuals know English only in a similarly secondary sense.

Now we can understand how Brandom goes beyond Wittgenstein. Brandom says: being a member of the group and having the right dispositions is necessary but *sufficient* for knowing a language. It is only the first of two steps. *Once* a person has those dispositions, and is appropriately embedded in that group, it is just a matter of time before that person partakes of the group's linguistic knowledge. (Brandom never says exactly *how* exactly the individual partakes of this collective knowledge. He says only that it happens some time *after* one becomes a member of the group and acquires the right dispositions.)

So for Brandom, being appropriately enculturated merely makes one *receptive* to knowledge of a language. It does not, contrary to what Wittgenstein says, *constitute* knowledge of a language.

IV. EVALUATING THE ARGUMENTS

Let us now evaluate what Wittgenstein and Brandom say. We will start with Wittgenstein's analysis of rule-following.

We must make a certain distinction very clear. Grasping propositions is *associated* with having certain dispositions. Nobody denies this. I grasp the proposition *2+2=4*, and this is associated, in some way or other, with my having various dispositions. For example, I am disposed to judge that Bill has four fruits if I know that he has two apples and two oranges, and no other fruits.

This point generalizes. I grasp the proposition *arsenic poisons*. Because I grasp this proposition, I have various dispositions. For example, I am disposed to shut my mouth if an evil scientist tries to make me drink what I believe to be arsenic. Wittgenstein is not just saying that grasping a proposition is *associated* with having various dispositions. That would be uncontroversial and trivial. He is saying that to grasp a proposition *is* to have various dispositions. For Wittgenstein, a grasp of the proposition does not *underlie* the dispositions: the dispositions *are* my grasp of the proposition.

Consider my disposition to shut my mouth if somebody tries to make me drink arsenic. For Wittgenstein, my grasp of the proposition *arsenic poisons* consists in my having this disposition, and various others like it. It doesn't *underlie* my having such disposition; it *is* my having those dispositions.

This view is simply false. My grasp of the proposition *arsenic poisons* causes me to shut my mouth when the evil scientist tries to make me drink arsenic. It *causes* me to have that kind of reaction to that kind of situation. It *causes* me to have the disposition in question: the disposition to shut my mouth when somebody tries to make me drink arsenic.

Causes are distinct from their effects. So my grasp of that proposition *causes* me to have the disposition in question; it therefore isn't *identical* with it. On the contrary, my grasp of the proposition must be quite distinct from that disposition and, by exactly analogous reasoning, from any other disposition. Thus for me to grasp that proposition is *not* to have a disposition or collection of dispositions.

It is true that my grasp of *arsenic poisons* is associated with my having various dispositions. But the association is one of causation, not one of identity. By exactly similar reasoning, my grasping *any* proposition is distinct from my having *any* disposition. A grasp of a proposition is associated with a certain set of dispositions by *causing* one to have those dispositions, not by *being* those dispositions.

I grasp the proposition 2+2=4. My grasp of that proposition *causes* me to judge that Bill has four fruits, when I know that he has two apples and two or-

anges. It *causes* me to have that kind of reaction to that kind of situation. It *causes* me to have the disposition in question: the disposition to judge that Bill has four fruits when I know that he has two apples and two oranges. So my grasp of the proposition must be quite distinct from that disposition and, by exactly analogous reasoning, from any other proposition. Thus my grasp of that proposition is not a disposition or collection of dispositions.

IV. 1 *Wittgenstein and semantic rules*

To see just *how* wrong Wittgenstein's analysis is, we must consider what it is to *mean* something by an expression.

I'm in a room. It is very hot in that room. I say: "It is hot in here." Obviously I *mean* something, a certain proposition, by those noises. What is involved in my *meaning* that proposition by those noises? Among the causes of my making those noises must be a grasp of a *semantic rule*: a rule that assigns meaning to noises or inscriptions. (In this case, the relevant semantic rule would be: a token of "It is hot in here" means that it is hot in the place occupied by the person who produced that token.)

If I *don't* grasp a semantic rule, then I plainly cannot mean *anything* by those noises. Imagine the following. I *don't* know that "It is hot in here" means *It is hot in here.*[10] I *don't* know that semantic rule. But I feel hot, and this feeling causes me to say "It is hot in here."

Under these circumstances, I haven't done anything linguistic. Doing something linguistic involves using a language. If one is to *use* a language, one must be aware of at least some of the semantic rules of that language; and this awareness must be a cause of one's behavior. In the case in question, such awareness was not among the causes of my behavior. Therefore, in those circumstances, I didn't *use* a language at all. I didn't do anything linguistic. In fact, I didn't even do anything *symbolic*. Doing something symbolic involves being aware of the fact that one thing stands for another. It thus involves being aware of what we might call a symbolic *rule.* In the case in question, I was not aware of such a rule. I was not aware of any semantic or, more generally, symbolic rule at all. To *mean* something by a noise or gesture is to engage in a piece of *symbolic* behavior. I am using something to convey a message. So in the case in question, I didn't mean *anything.*

Merely *reacting* to a situation with the right noises or inscriptions is not enough to engage in a piece of linguistic or symbolic behavior. Awareness of a semantic or symbolic rule must be among the cause of one's behavior. Now it is clear why Wittgenstein makes it impossible for anyone to mean anything by any-

thing — why he makes it impossible for there to be any linguistic or, more generally, symbolic activity.

Once again, consider the semantic rule:

(H) a token of "It is hot in here" means that it is hot in the place occupied by the person who produced that token.

Wittgenstein says this. I am disposed to say "it is hot" when I feel hot. For me to grasp (H) just *is* for me to have various dispositions like this one.

For reasons we have seen, this means that my grasping a semantic rule is never a *cause* of my saying "It is hot". I feel hot: here we have a situation. As a result, I say "It is hot": here we have my reaction to the situation. For Wittgenstein, my grasping (H) *consists* in situations like the one described causing me to have reactions like the one described. Causes are distinct from their effects. So, if Wittgenstein is right, my grasping (H) cannot be a *cause* of my reacting that way to such situations. My grasping (H) ends up having no causal role at all in my producing that sound. By exactly similar reasoning, given *any* semantic or symbolic rule, my grasping that rule has *no* causal role in my behavior.

As we've seen, this means that no one ever does *anything* linguistic or symbolic. No one ever means anything by anything. But obviously people do use language and symbolism. People *do* mean things when they produce noises or inscriptions. So Wittgenstein's analysis is simply false.

IV. 2 *Why we grasp propositions prior to knowing a language?*

On Wittgenstein's view, a grasp of propositions has no causal role in one's thought or behavior. People are in situations, and they *react* to those situations. But no grasp of a propositions or principles mediates between situation and reaction, between stimulus and response.

Given what we just said, it is clear that one must be able to grasp propositions *in order to* grasp semantic rules. To grasp a semantic rule is to recognize that some object or kind of object bears a certain proposition. Obviously grasping propositions is a *pre*-requisite to seeing that physical objects (noises or inscriptions) or types thereof *bear* propositions. So grasping a propositions is a pre-requisite to grasping semantic rules and, therefore, to knowing a language. An exactly similar argument shows that grasping a proposition is a pre-requisite to being able to *mean* anything. One must grasp propositions *before* one can do anything symbolic.

IV.3 *The error in the rule-following argument*

We know that *something* must be wrong with Wittgenstein's arguments. For they lead to the untenable views just discussed. But just what is the error in those arguments? Let's start with the rule-following argument.

Consider the proposition: *Penguins have feathers.* This is really a conditional:

(P) If a thing is a penguin, then that thing has feathers.

For me to *know* that this conditional holds is simply for it to be the case that, for any object O that I consider, I have the following belief: *O has feathers if O is a penguin.* So if I come across some *new* object O*, I don't have to *apply* my knowledge of P. Rather, my knowing P *consists in* (inter alia) its being the case that, under those circumstances, I have the following belief: *O* has feathers if O* is a penguin.*

Here we must be very careful about questions of scope. For me to grasp (P) is *not* for me to know of *each* object in the world that, if it is a penguin, then it has feathers. There are many objects that I don't know about; *a fortiori* I don't know *of* any one of them that, if it is a penguin, it has feathers. (Suppose there is some diamond in Nepal that I don't know about. I don't know that *that* very diamond has feathers if it is a penguin. For I have no awareness at all of that diamond. So I don't have any beliefs about *that* specific diamond.)

For me to grasp P is not to have a belief about *every* object — it is not for me to believe of each individual object that it has feathers if it is a penguin. For me to grasp P is for the following hold: for any object O that I should consider, I know the following: *O has feathers if it is a penguin.*

For *this* to hold, it isn't necessary that I be aware of each and every object in existence. It is necessary that, for any object that falls into my ken, I know the following: *it has feathers if it is a penguin.* We must give the universal quantifier — "for every object x" — *wide*-scope with respect to the "knows-that" operator.

So for me to know P just *is* for me to know, of each object in my ken, that it has feathers if it is a penguin. I do not have to *apply* P. Or, if you prefer, knowledge of P *is* knowledge of how it applies to each object I am aware of. So no *second* principle is needed to apply P in the right way: for me to grasp P *is* for me to know, for any object O in my ken, what property P assigns to O. Knowledge of P's application is built into knowledge of P; knowledge of some *second* rule is unnecessary.

(P) is not a "rule" in any obvious sense.[11] But what we just said about (P) applies squarely to things that are rules. Consider the rule: *You must stop your car when you come to a stop-sign.*

This rule is really a conditional claim:

(SP) *If* a driver comes to a stop-sign, *then* that driver must stop.

For me to grasp SP just *is* for the following to hold: given any situation where I know I am approaching a stop-sign, I know that *in that situation* I must stop.

So if I know that I am approaching a stop-sign, my grasping SP *automatically* involves my knowing that I must stop. I don't need to consider some *second* principle. For me to grasp SP just *is* this: for any situation I consider where somebody is approaching a stop-sign, that person must stop. So given that I know myself to be approaching a stop-sign right now, my grasping SP *involves* my knowing that I must stop. No second principle is involved.

Again, we must be extremely careful about matters of scope. My grasping SP does not involve my grasping *every* case of a person's approaching a stop-sign. My grasping SP requires only this: for any case I become aware of where somebody is approaching a stop-sign, I judge that, in that case, the driver must stop. I don't have to make that judgment with respect to *every* case where somebody approaches a stop-sign.

The word "rule" denotes quite different things. Sometimes it denotes relations that have nothing at all to do with human interests. (The function $F(x) = x^2$ is a "rule" in this sense.) And sometimes it denotes conventions that hold among people. (SP is a rule in *this* sense.) There are profound differences between these two kinds of rules.[12] But what we just said applies equally to rules in *both* senses.

Consider the rule $F(x) = x^2$. Wittgenstein's position amounts to this:

> If knowing that rule consisted in beholding some platonic object, then a vicious regress would threaten: one would have to know some second rule R_2 to apply the first rule in a principled way; and a third rule R_3 to apply the second rule in a principled way; and so on.

This is nonsense. Knowledge of the first rule suffices. For Bob (an arbitrary person) to grasp that rule simply *is* for it to be the case that, for any number n that Bob considers, Bob knows that $F(n) = n^2$. So if Bob considers the number 37, then *merely in virtue of grasping the function $F(x) = x^2$*, Bob knows that its value under F is identical with its square. So Bob doesn't need to know some *second* rule to apply the first rule. Rather, for Bob to have knowledge of the first rule just *is* for it to be the case that, for any number that comes to Bob's attention, Bob assigns that number a certain property (that of being such that its value under F is its square).

To know the rule *is* to know, for any number n that you consider, what property F(x) assigns to n.[13] So there is absolutely no gap — not even a notional one — being grasping the function and knowing how to apply it. There is no need for a second principle (let alone a third or a fourth…) So there is no regress.

Again, we must be careful about matters of scope. To grasp the function *F(x) = x²* is not to know *for each n* what F(n) is. After all, given any human being, there are infinitely many numbers that he will never contemplate and about which he will never make judgments. For you to grasp $F(x) = x^2$ is for it to be the case that, for any number n that you consider, you know what property F(x) assigns to n. This does not involve your knowing what property F(x) assigns to *every* number.

The inscription "penguins have feathers" must be interpreted. I can grasp that inscription without knowing what must hold for it to be true. But propositions are a different matter; they need not be (and cannot be) interpreted.[14] They are either grasped or not grasped.

Consider the proposition *snow is white.* This assigns truth to some situations and falsity to others. It is a *function* from situations to truth-values.[15] It is a rule. There is no difference between grasping a rule and knowing how that rule bears on particular objects (or situations) that fall within my ken. This is what we just saw. To *interpret* a rule is presumably to figure out how that rule bears on particular objects that fall within one's ken. To grasp a rule just *is* to have this knowledge. So there is never any need to *interpret* a rule. Propositions are rules; so there is never any need to *interpret* a proposition. (One interprets *symbolic expressions* of rules, not rules themselves. To interpret a legal statute is to figure out *which* rule it bears; it is not to figure out how a rule *applies* to a situation.) Thus our analysis recovers the generally held and independently plausible principle — denied by Wittgenstein — that it is *symbols*, and not the things they mean[16], that are ambiguous and in need of interpretation.

IV. 4 *The failure of the private language argument*

Like the rule-following argument, the private language argument is a failure. If Fred forgets the semantic rules of L, then the sentences of L will indeed tell Fred nothing; they will not be meaningful *to him*. But the same is true of the semantic rules for English. If I forget *those* rules, then English sentences will tell me nothing. English sentences will no longer mean anything *to me*.

Of course since many people speak English, they can remind me what those rules are, whereas nothing comparable can be done for Fred. But that is irrelevant. Memory is the only thing that *constitutes* the preservation of semantic rules: it doesn't matter whether the semantic rules belong to those of English or a pri-

vate language like L. The only difference between the two cases is that, in the case of English, more *causal* mechanisms are available to sustain the relevant memories. But in both cases, what *constitutes* the preservation of semantic rules is the very same thing: human memory. When that goes, the semantic rules go.[17]

Wittgenstein maintains that there can be no private language because nothing can constitute preservation of the semantic rules of such a language. If Wittgenstein were right, then nothing could constitute preservation of the semantic rules of a *public* language: Wittgenstein's argument thus shows there is no such thing as a *public* language!

The error in the private language argument is this. The semantic rules of a private language *can* be enforced. Wittgenstein thinks that such rules can be disobeyed with impunity and, consequently, that such rules are as good as non-existent. But that is because he is confusing the consequences of breaking a semantic rule with the *consequences* of those consequences.

Suppose a mathematician asks me to solve a problem. He promises me a million dollars if I answer it correctly. I think the answer is 412. But my knowledge of semantic rules is faulty; so I *say* "756", while *believing* that I am saying 412. As it happens, the answer *is* 756. I win a million dollars.

Two things happened here. First, I was misunderstood. So I *did* incur some kind of penalty for my linguistic incompetence. (Being misunderstood is *always* a penalty, even if, owing to chance causal mechanisms, it *leads* to greater rewards.) Of course, *because* I incurred that penalty — because I was misunderstood — I reaped some massive benefit: a benefit that eclipsed the penalty. But that doesn't mean that I didn't incur a penalty for being misunderstood.

So the penalty for violation of a semantic rule is being misunderstood. Being misunderstood may *in its turn* have social consequences — these may be good or bad. But these social consequences are not the penalty for breaking the rule, except indirectly. The penalty is a failure of communication.

Suppose Fred misuses an expression of L. When creating L, he stipulates that "blerg gleb blug" means *I had a wonderful day today*. On Monday, he writes this expression down in his diary. On Tuesday, he reads what he wrote. He mis-remembers the semantic rule just mentioned. So he takes his diary-entry to mean: *I had a terrible day today*. Fred *has* incurred a penalty for misapplying the semantic rules of L. There was a failure of communication (between his earlier self and his later self). This is the only kind of penalty that has any direct relevance to the enforcement of *semantic* rules. So the rules of L *are* enforced, contrary to what Wittgenstein says.

IV. 5 *Evaluating Brandom's argument*

It is immediately obvious that Brandom's argument fails. First of all, that argument presupposes the correctness of both the rule-following and private-language arguments. Since they fail, Brandom's argument fails.

But there is more to say. What would it take for a creature — say, a dog — to become a member of the *linguistic* community formed by English-speaking New Yorkers? Where English speaking New Yorkers are concerned, certain sounds cause certain mental contents and *vice versa*. Suppose the dog knows that these concomitances hold. This would be more than sufficient for the dog's sharing some kind of means of communication with those people[18]; it would thus be more than sufficient for the dog's being a member of a linguistic community formed by English speaking New Yorkers. Knowledge of these concomitances is garden-variety propositional knowledge. If one wants to learn these concomitances, it certainly *helps* to interact with the people they characterize. But, just as obviously, this interaction is not *identical with* such knowledge. My seeing certain inscriptions on a chalk-board may *cause* me to learn that 1+1=2. But the connection is merely causal, not constitutive.[19]

Obviously a Martian who was monitoring New Yorkers from his space-ship could learn these psycho-physical concomitances. But surely the Martian is not a part of the same community as those New Yorkers.

The only way Brandom could save his thesis is to say:

If one knows a language, one *ipso facto* is a member of a linguistic community and *vice versa*. If the Martian learns those concomitances — if he learns their system of communication — then *ipso facto* he is a member of the same linguistic community as they are.

But then Brandom's thesis becomes totally trivial. He is merely stretching the notion of community-membership to cover *any* case of speaking a language. Consequently, his thesis becomes the triviality: speakers of a language speak that language.

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NOTES

[1] My interpretation of Wittgenstein's arguments is similar to Kripke's [Kripke (1982)]. Kripke's interpretation has been severely criticized. So what right have to give a Kripkean reading of Wittgenstein's arguments? For the moment, let us leave aside the question what Wittgenstein himself meant. Kripke's interpretation corresponds very well to what people have *taken* Wittgenstein to show. Wittgenstein is *taken to show* that grasping rules (and propositions) consists *not* in dark internal processes, but in being acculturated in a certain way — in having dispositions of a certain kind in a certain cultural context. Wittgensteinians have launched countless scathing attacks on programs in philosophy and linguistics on the sole grounds that thinking and, more specifically, language-comprehension involve internal manipulations of propositions — on the sole grounds such programs presuppose that thinking consists in anything *other* than the acculturatedness just mentioned [see Baker and Hacker (1984)]. My Kripke-style interpretation argument may or may not be correct as an interpretation of Wittgenstein's own words. But it cannot seriously be doubted that it at least approximately corresponds to an extremely wide-spread and influential way of reading Wittgenstein. In fact, it would be very hard to identify *any* identifiably Wittgensteinian view on *anything* relating to language-comprehension and, more generally, mental representation that was not at least approximately captured by my interpretation of Wittgenstein. My other point is this. If you look at texts *other* than the *Philosophical Investigations* — if you look, for example, at Wittgenstein (1974) §§ 5-111 or Wittgenstein (1983) — it becomes very hard to regard Kripke's interpretation as entirely wrong.

[2] In this paper, I use the word "symbol" to refer to what, in strictness, is really a symbol-*token.*

[3] See Wittgenstein (1958) §§ 139-141. But this argument is given in many places in Wittgenstein's writings. Wittgenstein *repeatedly* says that *if* symbols expressed platonic entities, that wouldn't settle anything: for platonic entities are *themselves* symbols, and the question of meaning arises for them.

[4] Here I am going beyond what Wittgenstein *explicitly* says. But it is very clear that Wittgenstein is committed to this view concerning propositions. And I believe — though this will be debated — that he says it outright.

[5] This is the main point argued for in Part I of Wittgenstein (1974). I have found that, in that work, he states some of his arguments — especially those relating to rule-following and sentence-interpretation — much more perspicuously then he does in the *Philosophical Investigations.*

[6] This paragraph is, I fully admit, a piece of reconstruction; it is not a direct exegesis. But I think that if Wittgenstein's views are to be made coherent, it is through some such reconstruction.

[7] In any case, he *claims* that he is going beyond Wittgenstein. I don't really think he is. In fact, I am quite convinced that he is merely restating Wittgenstein's view.

[8] It isn't exactly clear what Brandom means by a group. He makes it very clear that *individuals* don't know English (except in a parasitic sense). Only some *group* knows English. But *which* group? Brandom doesn't say. Is it *any* group of two or more English-

speakers? Is it the class of *all* (present) English speakers? Is it the class of English speakers occupying a certain continuous (or semi-continuous) stretch of space-time? Brandom doesn't say. And for our purposes it doesn't matter. For the purposes of this argument, I am pretending that, in Brandom's view, it is only the class of all English-speakers that knows English. This may not be true to his intent. Maybe he has some other group in mind. But it doesn't matter: we will see that it is *never* a group — not a group of two, not a group of a million — that knows English; it is *always* an individual. And we will see that Brandom's arguments fail provided that, by "group", Brandom is referring to *any* entity comprising more than one individual.

[9] I myself leave it open whether the private language argument, if cogent, entails that only groups know languages.

[10] More precisely, I don't know that a token of "It is hot in here" means that it is hot in the place occupied by the person who produced that token.

[11] I happen to think that (P) *is* a rule. For I think that rules are just hypothetical propositions. But this is not the place to argue for this claim.

[12] In my view, some influential philosophical views exist only because people failed to register this ambiguity. To my knowledge, Wittgenstein at no point ever mentions the ambiguity of the word "rule". He never mentions the fact that "rules" in the sense of $F(x) = x^2$ are completely different kinds of entities from "rules" like *lawyers cannot borrow money from their clients.* He believes, apparently, that *all* rules are rules in the social sense. And he does argue for that extensively. But he doesn't even acknowledge that the word "rule" is *prima facie* ambiguous in the way just described.

[13] Of course, one may be aware of some number — say 23,567 — and not know right away with what number $F(x) = x^2$ pairs it off. But doesn't bear against my point. To grasp that function is for it to be the case that, for any number n, one considers, one knows that $F(x)$ pairs off n with n's square. One doesn't have to know *which* number that square is.

[14] In any case, they are not interpreted in the sense in which symbols are interpreted. Obviously often has to figure out what the implications of a proposition are. And this might, in some cases, be referred to as "interpretation". But this kind of interpretation (if that is even the right word) is entirely different from what goes on when one figures out what a noise or inscription means. There I am merely *identifying* some proposition (the proposition borne by the noise or inscription). In the other case, I have *already* identified the relevant proposition, and I'm merely tracing its consequences.

[15] See Lewis (1990), for the classic defense of this conception.

[16] Except, of course, in the special case where the thing meant by a symbol is itself a symbol, and is thus capable of ambiguity.

[17] Ayer (1986) have some points that are somewhat similar to this.

[18] If the dog were physically incapacitated, it might not be able to *deploy* this means of communication. But it would still *have* this means. Surely knowing such mind-body concomitances is more than enough — far more than enough — than is required to have such a means.

[19] See Ayer (1986) for a similar view.

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