"Not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our rules have loopholes open, and the practice has to speak for itself."

- Wittgenstein

OC, p.139.
CHAPTER IV

RULE FOLLOWING

The most famous argument of Wittgenstein, apart from that against private language, concerns teaching and following a rule. The argument is developed in the Philosophical Investigations, the Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics and elsewhere. It has had an enormous influence, even though there is little agreement as to what it implies. In the preceding chapter we had discussed Wittgenstein's private language argument and its role in the determination of meaning of words and sentences used in language. Wittgenstein strongly affirms that private language has no meaning at all because there is no rule to be followed in terms of which we determine the meaning of an expression.

From the discussion on the private language problem we know that there is a close relation between Wittgenstein's private language argument and the concept of rule following. So far as
Wittgenstein’s private language argument is concerned we can say that the doctrine it establishes is; the private language is impossible. It is, because, in the practice of private language we can say nothing whether we are following a rule correctly or incorrectly. The rule following is a fundamental concept in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy to understand the meaning of an expression. So we will take up in this chapter Wittgenstein’s conception of rule following which may be extrapolated as showing that there is a rule to be followed in the interpretation of language.

Generally in a society people use to communicate their thoughts, feelings and inspirations with other fellow beings through a medium of communication. Language is one of the important means that people use as a vehicle of transmission or reception of one’s thoughts and experiences in our communication process. If language is used as means for our communication, then it must be founded on some rules to enable one speaker to grasp easily the content of another’s speech. Wittgenstein opines that understanding is affected not by
explanation, but by training. Speaking a language is not possible without following a rule that governs the language while we use it. He further remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations* on learning of language maintaining that a child uses some primitive forms of language when it learns to talk. Here the teaching of language is not explanation, but training. And an important part of training will consist in the teacher’s pointing to objects, directing the child’s attention to them, for instance, the word ‘slab’ as he points to the shape. Wittgenstein does not want to call this ‘ostensive definition’ because the child can’t as yet ask what name is. He would rather call it ‘ostensive teaching of words’.

In this connection we may ask questions like what are the role of rule in language and what do we mean by following a rule. These are the main philosophical questions of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy.

In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein has given due importance to the discussion of whether a language is a rule-governed activity. He makes an attempt to consider his view in

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respect of the workings and understanding of language. The explanation given in the early work as regards the understanding of language reveals that language as an activity abides by certain fixed rules which determine the meanings of various expressions. The structure of language has a similar relation with the structure of world. The language pictures the reality by virtue of its similarity in the structures. 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. But this view has been rectified in his later work. The attempt of Wittgenstein in the later philosophy is to formulate a new method of analysis that differs from the early work. He shows in the Philosophical Investigations that language is not a rule-governed activity in the sense of mechanically and rigidly following rules. The concept of following rule in the practice of a language activity has been analysed in a new way.

Wittgenstein says in the Philosophical Investigations that it is the rules that determine the meaning of various expressions in language. The activity of language has a character of a single, unique, rigid calculus that controls the rules. K. Srinivas in his
article "Wittgenstein on Rule Following" observes that more than anything if it is viewed that these rules exist independently, of language use, this will make Wittgenstein’s philosophy uncomfortable to many of us. According to Srinivas, the natural tendency of most of the philosophers is to look for generality, whether such a generality has any relational basis or not. This description of rule following is often referred to as Platonism. Against this Platonism, Wittgenstein argues that language has many logics. These logics are identified with language game whose use rules are open to public accessibility.¹

The argument that Wittgenstein advanced for the rejection of Platonism was that it assumes the form of reductio. Following this argument Wittgenstein says that the supposed distinction between ‘obeying a rule’ and ‘disobeying a rule’ which is the basis of Platonism is ill founded. To refute the Platonic view Wittgenstein pointed out that a uniform rule followed in mathematics and logic determines the value structure of various propositions. The rule that we follow in the determination of the value of a proposition can be checked while we calculate the

logical operation. The rules of mathematics and logic already presume the values or function of something that we use in a rigid, uniform system. Thus, Platonism can be compared with rails laid down in advance to infinity. In this respect Wittgenstein writes:

"Whence comes the ideas 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 the 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 of space. --But if something of this sort really were the case, how would it help?"4

This passage shows us a clear picture of Wittgenstein’s thought that a rule simply guides us to examine whether we proceed correctly to the way or not. Wittgenstein attempt is not to say that rules do not guide us to correctness. But he wants to clear that the general misinterpretation of the rules in terms of moves fixed in advance to infinity reduces a rule follower to the level of a machine that blindly follows rule. He argues that if we follow a rule in this model in language then the very purpose of language as a medium of communication is failed. Language consists of diversity of rules that govern the use of various expressions. In a communication process through a language we are participating in the activities of language in which we follow different rules of different language games.

Findlay observes that it is Wittgenstein’s own perverse attempt to explain rule-obedience reductively that brings confusion and nonsense into the whole discussion. Whatever rules may be, they are not reducible to the series of acts that conform to them, and nothing transcendentally mysterious need be introduced if we recognise this.5 It is further clear that we do

have a different experience of cases where we perform correctly and according to rules. Owing to good training or some instinctive aptitude, but without having any sense of these rules as rules which govern our performance, we make room for the emergence of rule following in our very practice. In such cases we say that we do not really understand our own performance, and have no confidence that it is really right, though others may count it as such. Rules are only perfectly countable as rules when they are grasped and accepted as rules and the experience of grasp and acceptance is an insightful act not reducible to anything in the way of performance.

The rules of language are already laid down in advance within the community of language-users. To speak a language is to follow the rule of language in one way or other. A person as a rule follower may think that he is following a rule while he speaks the language. Thinking of following a rule is not following the rule in the true sense of the Wittgensteinian term. 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. After a rule
is followed we can understand the meaning of an expression. Wittgenstein, here, questions the relationship between rule follower and rule followed. He 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.

It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contended us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule
which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases."\(^6\)

The importance of rules is fundamentally required for the explanation of non-arbitrariness in the determination of meaning. It is needed to save a use from utter flexibility that may lead to a chaotic situation in linguistic communication. Rule cannot be conceded to be something artificially imposed on a human being the way it is imposed on a computer 'with particular programmes. The fact is that man is free in his action for choosing a rule to follow does not permit such as concession. We are not under compulsion to follow a rule. At the same time we cannot follow a rule arbitrarily.

We follow a rule publicly at the community level. There is no sense in following a rule privately. To obey a rule is custom, a practice; it is not an interpretation of the rule. To think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. It is not possible to obey a rule privately. This character of being public embedded in

\(^6\) Ludwig Wittgenstein, op. cit., section 201.
notions like custom or practice explains the public testability of a rule. But even if it explains the nature of a rule, it does not explain whether one following a rule or not. It provides no criterion for any such assessment.

Another important view that Wittgenstein observes in Platonism is that to obey a rule is to have a sense of being guided by a rule. In other words, the active participation in the activity of a language use means that the rule of language in a way commands the rule followers to follow rule. Wittgenstein, however, holds that there is a problem with this notion of rule following. The real problem is, believing in 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. But in a sense, he is not following a rule at all. Wittgenstein firmly believes that the supposed distinction between obeying a rule and disobeying a rule is illogical and ill founded.
The notion of rule following in Wittgenstein's philosophy is not a private affair. No one can follow a rule of any form in his own private realm. There are different opinions regarding the ontological status of inner mental activity. But Wittgenstein has stood against the views that rule following is an inner mental activity. The view that rule following is an inner mental activity is supported by some philosophers in a way that seem to mean that there is something really occurring in the mind of rule followers when they are following a rule. They opine that mental happening is necessary to follow a rule otherwise no one can follow the instruction of the rule. The inner mental happening is supposed to provide the rule follower an infallible guidance. However, Wittgenstein does not agree with this view. He asks, what is happening in the mind while we follow a rule and what is this something? If this something is fixed rule laid down in advance to infinity in the mind of rule follower then it qualifies as an instant mental talisman. But we do not have the real significance of instant talisman. We cannot clearly describe whether it is a mental image or a picture of something. To make this point clear Wittgenstein puts in the following.
"It is as if we would 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 that 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).\(^7\)

In this passage Wittgenstein clarifies that he does not deny the fact that we grasp the whole use of meaning of the word in 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. Wittgenstein maintains that the connection between the mental

\(^7\) Ibid., section 191 & 192.
happening in the mind of rule followers and the fixed rules can never be established.

There is another important feature of rule following. In a communication we use language in accordance with a fixed rule that is already framed. If the communication is to be successfully performed then we have to follow the rule of language, which we are going to use. In this sense we consider that rules have an independent existence. But Wittgenstein opines that this unwarranted conviction is grounded in the belief that rules give rise to objectivity. This conception has given a strong confidence in the minds of the rule followers. It is obviously clear from the rules of arithmetic, which impose certain standards of correctness on the rule followers. Thus we believe that there is a principle of objectivity or externality gives a sense of satisfaction to the rule follower.

Wittgenstein holds the view that there is a rigid rule in the practice of language. In language, the rule is framed by our collective understanding of linguistic practice as an activity. In this regard what we can say is that to follow a rule is an
adoption a common practice. This form of practice 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, what we call necessary relation between cause and effect is only based on habit and custom. In fact, for Hume there is no external standard that guarantees 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.

Wittgenstein considers language as an instrument of measurement of our customs. Wittgenstein in this regard provides further illustration. Let us take an example of signpost. We use many symbols in our communication process. Each and every symbol serves a definite purpose. The symbol dictates us the way in which we carry on any desired activity in a correct manner. It is meant to serve a definite purpose in our activities. 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 signpost for providing directions to the public.

Wittgenstein means by an interpretation of a sign, translating one sign to another. In this respect going back to the section 85 of the Philosophical Investigations sheds some further light on his intentions here:

"A rule stands there like a signpost – Does the signpost leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it shew which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross country? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one? – And if there were, not a single sign post, but a chain of adjacent ones or of chalk of marks on the ground – is there only one way of interpreting them? – So I can say, the sign post does after all leave no room for doubt. Or rather: it sometimes leaves room for doubt and
sometimes not. And now this is no longer a philosophical proposition, but an empirical one."\(^8\)

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".\(^9\) It amounts to saying as regards a rule that "the application of the concept of following a rule presupposes a custom".\(^10\) As a matter of fact the term custom, institution, use, practices are used as synonymous by Wittgenstein.

In the analysis of rule following Wittgenstein considers the two important aspects. The first aspect of rule following is discussed from the standpoint of argument by way of negation. He says that the rule following is neither an inner mental activity nor a mysterious practice. This argument is developed 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 mental act. To understand rules and to follow them is to

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\(^8\) Ibid., section 85.
\(^9\) Ibid., section 198.
familiarise oneself with the existing customs of a community of language users.

Secondly, Wittgenstein holds that following a rule is essentially a social practice. This social practice suggests that rule following is a mutual agreement that is prevalent in the community of language users. The interaction among the individuals in a society is possible only when they follow the existing rules or norms that are permitted by the customs. The communication may not be successful if two persons belonging to different community of language users attempt to exchange their ideas.

Wittgenstein further remarks that “the word agreement and the word rule are related to one another, they are cousins. If I teach anyone the use of the one word, he learns the use of the other with it”.

It rules out the possibility of private rule following. Even if someone follows a rule in accordance with his own formulation, there is no way to check whether he is following it correctly. Nobody can follow any rule in isolation

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from community of language users. The public criteria is one of important aspects to check one’s activity of rule following. The notion of custom or practice is the key notion in Wittgenstein’s analysis of rule following.

Wittgenstein insists that the notion of custom is not used in the technical sense. Rather, it is used in the literal sense of the term. A custom is something what we consider as regular, repeated and established system of the society. We use rules within a boundary on the basis of well established system or custom prevailing in the society. As a form of social practice there is no external or objective factor that controls the rule following. In such situation one may be said to have disobeyed a rule only when his linguistic practices do not conform to the existing social customs. Wittgenstein believes that language is necessarily built on a predetermined structure of language system. He feels “Giving . . . grounds . . . come to end . . . in our acting which lies at the bottom of the language game”.12

To follow a rule, according to Wittgenstein, is one's ability to use certain expressions. The ability of rule follower is achieved from the basic training as the members of a community of language users. There is an agreement in the language that they use. This agreement is not an agreement of opinion but agreement in form of life. The concept of form of life has played a dominant role in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. A form of life is an underlying consensus of linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour, traditions, practices and customs that are shared by the individuals as members of the community of language users. 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.

The community view of the concept of following a rule implies that there must be criteria for dividing whether there is a rule that an individual is following. And so it implies the impossibility of a language that contains names for sensations in which these names are used quite independently of the behaviour and bodily state of the user of the language. So there is an exceedingly simple transition from the conclusion of
Wittgenstein's investigation of rule following — it is not possible to obey a rule privately — to the conclusion of words for sensations. It is not possible for them to be there in a private language.

The fact is that when Wittgenstein gives the result of his investigation of the concept of following rule, he introduces the notion of a practice. The notion extends equivalently to regular use or a custom or an institution or a technique. In the analysis of the practice, the contrast he draws is not a contrast between the behaviour of a solitary individual and the practice of a community. It is instead a contrast between a solitary occasion and a practice that pertains to many occasions. Thus Wittgenstein writes in the Philosophical Investigations:

"Is what we call 'obeying a rule' something that it would be possible for only one man to do, and to do only once in his life? This is of course a note on the grammar of the expression 'to obey a rule'."
It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood; and so on. To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions).

To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique."\(^{13}\)

The paradigm of Wittgensteinian problem was designed for a mathematical problem, it was emphasised that it is completely general and can be applied to any rule or word. Suppose we teach our children the calculation of simple arithmetic. How do we communicate the problem of mathematics with our children who are not having knowledge of mathematics earlier? Naturally we have to teach the rule of computation and its method of application. The arithmetic calculation has rule, e.g., ‘add 2’. The

\(^{13}\) Ludwig Wittgenstein, op. cit., section 199.
child after acquiring the knowledge of following the rule then proceed to apply this rule to the natural number, writing down 2, 4, 6, 8, and so on. On reaching 1000 he goes on 1004, 1008, 1012. Examining this process, we may ask that whether the child is going on in the same way or not. We may say that the child is not following the rule so he commits an error in calculation. But the child in turn may rejoin, no, this is the same way I have been following from the beginning. There comes a conflict or dispute of rule in the practice. Wittgenstein's attempt to formulate the method of solving such dispute is banking on the practice of language. He writes:

"But I already knew, at the time when I gave the order, that he ought to write 1002 after 1000". - Certainly; and you can also say you meant it then; only you should not let yourself be misled by the grammar of the words 'know' and 'mean'. For you don't want to say that you thought of the step from 1000 to 1002 at that time - and even if you did think of this step, still you did not think of other ones. When you said "I already knew at the time . . ." that
meant something like: "If I had then been asked what number should be written after 1000, I should have replied '1002'". And that I don't doubt. This assumption is rather of the same kind as "If he had fallen into water then, I should have jumped in after him". – Now, what was wrong with your idea? 14

Wittgenstein holds that the rules are already fixed in the function of arithmetic calculation. When we calculate the order, our mind as it were flew ahead and took the steps before we physically arrive at this or that result. The steps are already taken even before we take them in writing or orally or in thought. They are in some unique way predetermined, anticipated as only the act of meaning can anticipate reality. We follow this predetermined step as a formula of use in right manner.

There is a similarity between Wittgenstein's rule following argument and Goodman's paradox concerning 'green' and 'glue'. Nelson Goodman's discussion of new riddle of induction also

deserves comparison with Wittgenstein’s work on rule following. The basic strategy of Goodman’s treatment of the new riddle is strikingly close to Wittgenstein’s sceptical argument. Like Goodman’s paradox, the rule following argument can be strengthened so as to yield alarming conclusion. The meaning of our rules is given by our practice. To follow a rule of either arithmetic calculation or use of word in different contexts is our arbitrary action, which is guided by our decision. When we follow a rule there is an inner decision of our mind that is derived from what we mean. Now we come back to the above example of ‘add 2’. What we mean by the rule ‘add 2’ is determined by the fact that we go on 1002, 1004, etc. Since the applications of rule are varied we cannot know all the applications in advance. So the rule is obeyed by our application in a particular context.

In his book Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language Kripke gives an analysis of this argument in another form so as to emphasise its sceptical force. Imagine a mathematical operation called ‘quus’ defined as follows: \( x \, quus \, y = x \, \text{plus} \, y \), provided \( x \) and \( y \) are both less than 50; otherwise \( x \, quus \, y = 57 \).
In this mathematical operation we do not find inconsistency and we could easily imagine the method of operation. Suppose now that Jim is good at arithmetic but has never dealt with numbers higher than 50. All his additions have involved the numbers up to 50; but have not involved any higher number. How do we know that Jim means plus, when he says ‘x plus y’, and not quus? He cannot mean both, since they are incompatible. The evidence is compatible with either hypothesis. Indeed there are infinitely many functions on what might be meant by ‘plus’ on Jim’s lips, all of them incompatible with the others. Since we cannot determine whether Jim mean plus or quus, we cannot know what he means. Worse, we cannot know what we mean either. However far we go with our arithmetic there will always be calculations that we have not performed. And how do we know in advance that when we perform them the answer will come out as x plus y, rather for some new version of quus?

The assertion of the above argument’s limited scope runs counter to Kripke’s claim that these problems of under-determination of meaning apply throughout language and are not confined to mathematical examples, though it is with
mathematical examples that they can be most smoothly brought out.\textsuperscript{15} We need, therefore, to review Kripke’s handling of non-mathematical terms such as ‘table’. Kripke’s sceptic argues essentially in the same manner as in ‘+’ case. Any speaker has used the word ‘table’ only finitely many times while there are infinitely many situations in which he could use this word. Thus, according to the sceptic, the speaker’s past usage of table is compatible with its many nonstandard interpretations. For example, it could mean \textit{tablir}, where a \textit{tablir} is “anything that is a table not found at the base of the Eiffel Tower, or a chair found there”.\textsuperscript{16}

There is a controversial point between realism and anti-realism. A conventional view asserts that the customs or practices of rule following are purely based on social conventions. This explains the agreement among the members of a group or community. In a situation the social conventions may point to the correctness of rule following. But rules themselves become anti-realistic. We leave nothing to language as such and

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 19.
the best we do is arbitrariness followed collectively instead of individually.

On the other hand, if we accept a realistic interpretation and propound the anatomy of languages we have to insist on an ineffable grammar of language. The constitutive rules of a language-game are somehow beyond the hold of the community. The grammar really exists but is instantiated in our practice. We are granting a reality to language over and above the social consensus.

Kripke draws a parallel with 'glue' and 'green'. And he goes on to espouse, first a radical scepticism about meaning, and secondly a kind of anti-realist response to scepticism. Neither position has recommended itself to his readers. But his trenchant statement of Wittgenstein's argument has awoken all of them from their dogmatic slumbers just as Hume's argument about causation awoke Kant from his.

Wittgenstein himself was concerned to shift philosophy in an anthropological direction. The ultimate facts, he suggests are
not to be found where philosophers normally search for them. They do not concern necessities, but contingencies about the human conditions: about our customs, practices and form of life. It is these that they are must take for granted as the given. And it is to these that we should return in order to answer the ultimate questions.