



HARRY P. STEIN

The Hazards of Harmony¹

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Institute for Logic, Language and Computation (ILLC)
University of Amsterdam
Plantage Muidergracht 24
NL-1018 TV Amsterdam
The Netherlands
e-mail: ilc@fwi.uva.nl

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The Hazards of Harmony

Harry P. Stein, ILLC, Department of Philosophy, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Doelenstraat 15,
1012 CP Amsterdam, stein@ilic.uva.nl

1.

We feel that the difference between speaking a language and producing an inscrutable babel of sounds lies in the fact that the former activity is governed by a set of shared rules. Taking this intuition seriously, generative grammarians have come to regard an innate rule-system as the corner-stone of individual linguistic competence. Yet, in the last decade there has been a growing consensus amongst philosophers that such a conception of rules is problem-ridden, and furthermore, that Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following in the *Philosophical Investigations* might lead to a substantial enlightenment about our concept of a rule. This renewed interest in Wittgenstein's views on rules was kindled by the appearance of Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, in which Kripke advanced a sceptical concern with the objective status of rules as the key to understanding Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

Kripke's *Wittgenstein* has met with an avalanche of criticism. Prominent critics are Baker and Hacker, who have repeatedly exposed the exegetical and systematic flaws in Kripke's interpretation. Wittgenstein's crucial observation, they argue, is that a rule and the acts of following it are *internally* related. Therefore, this relation can neither be mediated by mental or platonic 'mechanisms', nor does it merit sceptical worries. Rather, this accord between rule and act is one instance of what they call *the harmony between language and reality*, which, like everything else metaphysical, is to be found in the grammar of language. A rule and an act 'make contact' in the intra-grammatical relations between *formulations* of rules and *descriptions* of acts.

This "theory of harmony" is a substantial thesis which merits closer attention. If this is indeed the point which Wittgenstein was making in the *Philosophical Investigations*, then Baker and Hacker have distilled a succinct and clear-cut argument from Wittgenstein's often sibylline pronouncements, which effectively short-circuits approaches to rule-following such as Chomsky's and Kripke's.

2.

Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following in the *Philosophical Investigations* open with the question how his view that the meaning of a word is its use in the language can be reconciled with the fact that we can also instantaneously grasp the meaning of a word. How could that which we grasp in a flash be the same thing as the use, which is stretched out in

time? The suggestion on which Wittgenstein focuses is that in grasping the meaning of a word or the rule for a series, we thereby lay hold of an interpretation, which determines how we understand it, and from which the use follows.

Yet, an interpretation or any other item which we can grasp or lay hold of, must itself be understood in a certain way, and that, in its turn, will depend on how it is to be applied. Thus, if the relation between rule and action would require the help of an intermediate interpretation, then *any* act could be made to accord with a given rule. Or, as Wittgenstein puts it, “any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.”[PI 198] There is no suggestion that this leads to sceptical problems. Rather, “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. [...] And hence also ‘obeying a rule’ is a practice.”[PI 201-2]

Still, from those concise remarks it is not immediately clear what point Wittgenstein is making. In particular it can be asked what he actually did take the relation between a rule and the acts which are in accord with it to consist in.

According to Baker and Hacker, the key to understanding Wittgenstein’s view on rules is to realize that they concern one more instance of a broader phenomenon which they denominate “the harmony between language and reality”. One instance of this ‘harmony’ which occupied Wittgenstein during the thirties, and is also discussed in the *Philosophical Investigations*, is ‘the harmony between thought and reality’: the relation of thoughts, expectations or desires, to the facts which fulfil them. We might be tempted to regard an expectation and the fact which fulfils it as logically independent items belonging to different ontological realms: the mental and the (physical) world. Yet there is an intimate fit between these two which goes beyond any empirical relation. The expectation and its fulfilment are ‘internally related’, in the sense that it is unthinkable that *these* two things should not stand in *this* relation.

In deeming such relations to be internal, Wittgenstein did not commit himself to ineffable metaphysical connections. “Like everything metaphysical” it is remarked in *Zettel* 55, “the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language”. Our concept of what it is to have expectations is closely connected with the ability to give expression to them, and it is a fact of grammar that a phrase only expresses an expectation, if it contains a description of its fulfilment. Or, as Baker and Hacker explain such remarks:

“The metaphysical harmony between language and reality is a reflection of a transparent connection between the uses of symbols, e.g. ‘the expectation that p’ =_{df} ‘the expectation that is fulfilled by the event p’. [...] it is evident that no shadowy intermediaries are necessary to connect an expectation and its fulfilment, since they are connected in language. [RGN 88]

Baker and Hacker claim that Wittgenstein regarded the relation between a rule and an act

according with it as yet another instance of this “harmony between language and reality”. For firstly, a rule and the acts which accord with it are internally related, just as an expectation and its fulfilment are. *This* rule, e.g., developing the series of even numbers, would not be the rule which it is if certain acts, e.g., writing ‘1002’ after ‘1000’, did not count as being in accord with it.

Secondly, they believe that this internal relation is also a reflection of the grammar of our language:

“... a sentence asserting an internal relation between two things (e.g. ‘writing “1002” after “1000” is in accord with the rule “+2” at the 500th step’) never expresses an empirical proposition and is not a description of two objects. It is rather the expression of a grammatical rule (e.g. that instead of ‘He acted in accord with the rule “+2” at the 500th step’ one may say ‘he wrote “1002” after “1000”’) [...] An internal relation is a shadow of grammar, and can as well be called a grammatical relation.” [RGN 105]

For that reason, it is only by investigating the grammar of our language that we can hope for enlightenment about the relation between rules and acts:

“... the relation between a rule and what is in accord with it is rendered unmysterious and perspicuous by grammatical remarks [...] it is a grammatical truth that an F’s ϕ ing in circumstances C is an act in accord with the rule that F’s should ϕ in C; and equally ‘The rule that F’s should ϕ in C’ = ‘The rule that is followed by an F’s ϕ ing in C’. [...] It is *in language* that a rule and the act in accord with it [...] make contact.” [RGN 91]

From the above it may be clear why Baker and Hacker think that Chomsky’s and Kripke’s views on rules are misguided. If a rule and the actions which are in accord with it are *internally* related, then there simply is no occasion for positing ‘connecting mechanisms’, nor is there any call for sceptical ruminations when such mechanisms prove to be lacking. Furthermore, such internal relations are quite unmysterious, and can be explained as a reflection of the grammar of our language.

So according to Baker and Hacker the internal relation between a certain rule (formulated as “R”) and this action of obeying it (called “r-ing”), is merely a reflection of the following grammatical observations about our language:

- a. “the rule to R” =_{df} “the rule obeyed by r-ing”
- b. “this rule we call ‘R’”
- c. “this action we call ‘r-ing’”.

The first statement expresses a grammatical rule of English for relating the expressions “R” and “r-ing”, the two other statements partly lay down their correct use.

If asked *why* we call this action ‘r-ing’, Baker and Hacker might rightly point out that in as far as this question aims at some ultimate justification for our use of language, it is misguided. Grammar does not allow or need any such justification.

3.

Thus, departing from the correct observation that the relation between a rule and what accords with it is internal, Baker and Hacker present us with an unequivocal interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following, which also succeeds in relating those reflections to Wittgenstein's remarks about the 'harmony between thought and reality'. Yet, I think that those advantages are merely chimerical, since it is quite wrong to think that rules and the acts which are in accord with them are related in *grammar*.

The problems with this view become apparent once we realize that grammar, as is stressed by Baker and Hacker, is an array of rules for the use of the expressions of a particular language. Both features, grammar being language *specific* and it being an array of *rules*, lead to difficulties.

Firstly it may be observed, that despite significant grammatical differences between Dutch and English, the English and the Dutch follow the very same rule for developing the series of even numbers, and that they acknowledge the same relation between this rule and acting in accord with it. In as far as both languages can be said to be similar in talking about following such rules, it is because of the same, non-language specific practice which the speakers of both languages have.

Secondly, if grammar is itself an array of rules, it is impossible to see how the detour via grammar could provide us with the required explanation of internal relations in the first place. After all, a grammatical rule for the use of expressions is itself internally related to certain speech acts in which those expressions are used. *This* rule of grammar would not be what it is, if *those* speech acts were not in accord with it, and vice versa. Thus, even if we were to claim that the internal relation between rules and acts is a reflection of our ways of formulating rules and describing acts, then this would still not be a general explanation of internal relations. Rather it would presuppose such relations on the grammatical level.

Yet, I think should not see the accord between rule and act as a reflection of the rules of grammar at all. Whether an act is in accord with a certain rule is not a *reflection* of the fact that in our language the formulation of the rule is grammatically related to act-descriptions. It is a reflection of the fact that we have certain practices, which need not be linguistic. Therefore we can also follow rules even if we lack the appropriate vocabulary for formulating them or describing the acts which are in accord with them. For example, we have a practice of giving and continuing series and patterns. Now, take this pattern:

∂ ‡ ¥ ∂ ‡ ¥ ∂ ‡ ¥ ∂ ‡ ...

Certainly this pattern would not be what it is, if ¥ was not the next element in its continuation, in the same way as the series 2, 2, 2, 2, ... or the series 1, 2, 3, 4, ... would not be what they are if their continuation was not 2 and 5. In this case we have the same mutual dependency which we have between a more ordinary rule and an act in accord with it. Yet, this example is deliberately constructed in such a way that we lack any obvious linguistic means of describing the pattern. Of course we might artfully devise such means. But even

then it would be topsy-turvy to claim that the internal relation between the pattern and its proper continuation is a reflection of some grammatical relation between the description of the pattern and the description of its continuation. Given our nature, our training, our practices, we cannot help seeing here a pattern and a continuation.

4.

The outcome of these reflections is that grammar cannot play the role which Baker and Hacker assign to it. The relation between our rules and the acts which accord with them is not the reflection of a grammatical ‘orchestration’, rather, grammar itself depends on such internal relations too.

But in rejecting the suggestion that such internal relations are a reflection of grammar, are we not therefore committed to ineffable metaphysical relations? In order to get a foothold, we should distinguish two questions:

1. What is the content of a rule?
2. What constitutes the content of a rule?

The first question concerns formulations and descriptions. It is a question which can be asked and answered by those who are already basically involved in our practice of language use. The second, constitutive question can only be answered by pointing out that a community of speakers has a certain practice, that they are trained in a particular way, that they by nature have certain responses, and so on.

It is this distinction which is also crucial for understanding Wittgenstein’s “deviant pupil” example in *PI* 185. The chasm gaping between us and the pupil cannot be closed within the confines of our practice of teaching and explaining mathematics, because it concerns the very ‘bedrock’ on which those practices rest, the natural frame-work in which those practices are embedded. As Wittgenstein concludes about the deviant pupil [my translation]:

“In such a case we might say something like: By nature this person understands this order, in response to our explanations, as *we* understand the order: ‘Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000 and so on.’”

We are different from the pupil in what actions come naturally and unreflectively to us. Not in how those actions should be described. The fact that we acknowledge internal relations by following rules in certain ways, is presupposed by all our normative practices. As Wittgenstein puts it in the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Mathematics* VI 28: “Following according to the rule is at the BOTTOM of our language-game”.

The accord between rule and act which we acknowledge by following the rule as we do is *rooted* in our nature, our training and our practices. Internal relations are ‘primitive’; they are given and cannot be derived from anything else. They are simply there, just as our natural ways of acting and reacting or our practices. Internal relations are not to be found in grammar, but rather in the unassailable certainty of our actions.

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