Regularities and Social Practices: Reconsidering Wittgenstein's Rule-Following Argument

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Abstract

Wittgenstein's rule-following argument captures the underlying problem concerning how meaning gets attached to what we do. Besides the debate on rules as normative constraints of meaning in the philosophy of language, the illustration of the problem is also evident in how regularities and necessity play a role in understanding social practice in the philosophy of social science. The contested views on the notion of practice are between a thin view (Humean regularist view) and a thick view (e.g., presumably, Wittgensteinian view). While the thin view is represented as the view that there are mere regularities in behaviour, the thick view takes it that necessities (in the sense of normativities) are inhered in regularities. According to Haslanger (2013), the thickest view can fall into the trap of an intentionally overloaded thick view, namely, the view that there is no gap between the regularities in what we do and the normativity of what we do. Examples of the intentionally overloaded thick view discussed in this paper include the ideas of Winch and Diamond. Based on McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein's rule-following argument, this paper argues for the non-intentionally overloaded thick view where rules are engaged within practices but are objectively characterizable. Arguing for the non-intentionally overloaded thick view, the paper exploits Haslanger's project of doing philosophy, namely, the ameliorative aim. This sort of thick view entails realism about social structure, which may lead to the circularity problem. That is, behaviour regularities are assumed to be the effect of some causal properties of a social structure before it is known whether such properties exist. However, the paper argues that the regularities in question should be taken as phenomenal regularities, which can be stated as counterfactual conditions.

0. Introduction

The fundamental issue of how meaning is attached to our actions or the concept of practice is captured by Wittgenstein's rule-following argument. Among the various types of reading of the argument, McDowell's transcendental reading is the most appropriate for answering the question. In particular, the answer can help illuminate a disputed issue in the philosophy of the social sciences, namely, the role of regularities and necessities in explaining social phenomena. The contested views are between a thin and thick view. As it is generally understood, the thick view holds that normativities or meanings are inherent in regularities in behaviours. The thickest view is what Haslanger (2013:9) refers to as the intentionally loaded view holding that all regularities in behaviours are intentional or laden with meanings. The *thin* view holds that descriptive facts are self-standing, and to make sense of such facts, one needs a value-added schema. The thinnest view

holds that there are mere regularities in behaviours. In contrast to the thin view, the thick view rejects the idea that descriptive facts and their meanings have a detached nature. However, rejecting detachment makes it easy for the thick view to be intentionally overloaded, in which there is no friction between what is right and what seems right. It is precisely what Wittgenstein remarks in PI 2009: §201 as a paradox: there is no distinction between following and conflicting with the rule. A solution can be found in McDowell's interpretation of Wittgenstein's rule-following argument that we require the idea of rules that are critically engaged inside practices or the non-intentionally overloaded thick view (NTV). It is the idea of social practices where the engagement with rules takes shape. Looking at it from the perspective of philosophy's ameliorative aim, the NTV is also more appealing. The ameliorative aim is to address and perhaps rectify social injustice philosophically. As Haslanger says, "... philosophical inquiry is an inquiry into the concepts we (collectively) ought to use." (2013:22).

In this paper, I examine two kinds of thick views, Winch and Diamond, to show how their views are sort of intentionally overloaded thick view and fall into the trap of the rule-following dilemma. I will first briefly introduce McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein's rule-following argument and use it as a gauge for a sufficient account of the NTV. Then, in the second section, I look at the intentionally overloaded thick views, Winch and Diamond, to show that their views cannot avoid the dilemmatic situation. In the last section, I argue that the NTV is most apt for the ameliorative aim of doing philosophy.

1. Wittgenstein's Rule-Following Argument

McDowell's way of reading the rule-following argument provides a good test tool for a sufficient thick account of practice. The point of the rule-following argument (PI 2009: §138-242) concerns the nature and existence of the normative patterns that govern meaning and use. In using words, it seems some normative rules or patterns guide us on the correct and incorrect use. However, when articulating the rule, we face a dilemma. That is to say, if there are rules for the correct use, then this opens to the regress of rule interpretations; conversely, if we deny that there are rules at all, then we are left without a concept of the normativity of meaning, and the distinction

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between correct and incorrect disappears. McDowell (1984: 342) calls this situation the dilemma of Scylla and Charybdis. On the one hand, we will face the Scylla if following a rule is governed by a super-rigid rule, the problem of which is the regress of rule-interpretation. On the other hand, if rules do not exist, we are in the Charybdis situation; there will be no normative constraint for following rules. The latter is the situation of "bedrock", where things can be as they are; nothing seems right or wrong (PI 2009: §217).

The solution to the dilemma lies in an explanation of practice, which is not only an act without interpretation but also rule-governed. Such a solution requires the idea of belonging to "a custom (PI §198), practice (PI § 202), or institution (RFM VI-31)" (1984: 342). An explanation of meaning that is internal to the linguistic community's context is necessary for the account of linguistic use. However, it is the sense of a linguistic community which is "...bound together, not by a match in mere externals (facts accessible to just anyone), but by a capacity for a meeting of minds." (ibid.:351). The 'meeting of minds' is the way one can know another's meaning without interpretation. So, in that sense, we do not employ the concept of practice or 'communal practice' as an interpretation of meaning. Instead, the communal practice itself is the context within which meaning lies.

There are two crucial points here. First, though communal practice is the way out, it does not mean there is no objectivity of meaning. It means that the objectivity of meaning is not autonomous from use within a context. The rejection of the autonomy of meaning is only in the sense that the pattern of use extends itself to new cases without our perspective on the pattern. In other words, a notion of truth-conditions is still *given in the language* we use and understand. Second, the objectivity of meaning involves our epistemic and ontological engagement with an object. Epistemically, the engagement is in our ways of thinking about an object. Ontologically, the object of our direct engagement does exist.

To understand how this is possible, we need to grasp the idea of direct realism. Such an idea is provided by McDowell's disjunctive account of perceptual experiences. (McDowell 1986:151). The disjunctive account of experiences is the idea that there are no common characteristics between experiences of appearance and experiences of reality. But they are disjunctively interwoven

with each other, namely, "that an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be *either* a mere appearance *or* the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone." (McDowell 1982:386). There are erceptual experiences in non-veridical cases (such as delusions, illusions, and hallucinations), but its content is merely non-veridical descriptive content. An important implication is that an independent objective constraint on experiences is possible because of the disjunctive fact, which shows a difference between the two experiences.

McDowell's disjunctive account of experience interprets Wittgenstein as a direct realist. This is different from other ways of realist reading, e.g. Diamond's resolute reading (Diamond 1995, 2012) and contra to other readings like Winch's (1958, 1964). In the next section, I argue how Winch and Diamond's reading fall into the dilemmatic situation of Scylla.

2. The Intentionally Overloaded Thick View

Like McDowell's reading, the realistic spirit that Diamond attributes to Wittgenstein does not reject the objectivity of meaning; instead, it rejects the idea of objectivity independent of our thoughts' characterization. However, such a rejection is at risk of attributing Wittgenstein a relativist view. Diamond's reading tries to steer its way toward non-relativism but unsuccessfully when addressing the issue of incommensurability between conflicting worldviews. This can be seen when she argues against Winch (1964) and Dilman (2002), who take Wittgenstein to be more relativist in nature (see Diamond 2012).

In criticizing Anscombe (1981), Diamond thinks that Wittgenstein's position in dealing with the problem of incommensurability is much more complicated, i.e., criticism from outside different language-games or practices is impossible. For Diamond, there are "rational grounds" for criticizing conflicting worldviews, but not in the sense of "the standards of what counts as rational available independently of and prior to the articulation of thought about conflicting worldviews" (Diamond 2012: 129). Diamond seems to suggest that in criticizing any different or conflicting worldviews, we need to conceptualize their worldview from our own. She uses the practice of "witch-fearing and witch-finding" as an example, presumably in opposition to "witch-denial" in

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scientific practice. According to Diamond, judgments about conflicting worldviews, such as those between science and witchcraft, cannot be made "in advance of the conflict itself." (ibid.:128). This means that the justification of a practice needs to be expressed within its unique conceptual framework. Science, as an external practice, is not an adequate justification to support the practice of witchcraft in this case.

The implication is that the conflicting practices are incommensurate, meaning that it is not conceivable to take in criticism from outside each practice. Yet, that sounds far-fetched. The main problem is that the realistic spirit that Diamond ascribes to Wittgenstein is not realistic enough. It is still trapped in the intentionally overloaded thick view, so that changing view requires merely an inferential practice within one's own schema, the problem of which is the loss of an independent normative judgement.

The problem with Diamond's view is similar to Winch's treatment of the rule-following argument. According to Winch's Wittgenstein, understanding meaning is following a rule. This is a grasp of the normativity of meaning. Winch said that "...the notion of following a rule is logically inseparable from the notion of *making a mistake*" and "A mistake is a contravention of what is *established* as correct; as such, it must be *recognizable* as such a contravention." (Winch 1958: 32). The criterion of mistake is established not by "any individual in complete isolation from other individuals.". He says, "For it is contact with other individuals which alone makes possible the external check on one's actions which is inseparable from an established standard." (Ibid.). This means that participation in a community practice, or the internal standard of correctness, clearly defines the idea of normativity of meaning. This point is apparent when Winch discusses Pareto's view on the problem of how, for a sociologist, social phenomena can be studied independently from being participants in such phenomena (Winch 1958: 95). Pareto's answer is to employ a scientific approach to sociology where objective knowledge can be gained. That is possible because of Pareto's naturalistic assumption, that is, social events can be viewed as physical events; therefore, being participants in the social events as the object of study can be ignored. But Winch's criticism is that Pareto's answer is absurd because if one studies the social phenomena the same way as physical phenomena, "the events he is studying lose altogether their character as *social* events" (Winch 1958: 108).

Social events involve participants' way of life. So, Winch says, "It is not open to him arbitrarily to impose his own standards from without." (Ibid.). In parallel with Diamond, the practice of natural sciences is not the rational standard for making judgements on non-scientific practice (Winch 1958:102). However, for Winch, this does not mean that scientific practice in itself is not legitimate. The reason for him might be that philosophy is an "uncommitted enquiry" (Ibid.). In contrast to the philosophy's ameliorative aim, Winch takes philosophy's task as concerning the elucidation of various forms of thought and shows "how this leads on to the elucidation and comparison of different forms of life" (Ibid.).

To summarize Winch's idea, the normativity of meaning lies internally within the practice of its own participants. When it comes to the problem of how social scientists study social phenomena that they themselves are part of, Winch answers that it is conceptually impossible to study social phenomena without being participants in such phenomena. An implication of Winch's idea is not only that criticism of one's community practice is not possible from outside its own conceptual scheme, but also that even within one own community practice, it is not clear how internal norms can be the only source of correctness. The latter brings in the problem quite like what Wittgenstein says, "As if someone were to buy several copies of the morning paper to assure himself that what it said was true." (PI 2009: §265). This is Scylla's situation: the community's norms are so overloaded that it becomes difficult to distinguish between what is right and what appears right. An example might be this. Suppose one lives in a witchcraft culture. It is possible to find certain aspects of life there unsatisfactory, such as the suppression of women, children, animals, the elderly, and disabled people. It seems, according to Winch's analysis, employing the term "suppression" is meaningless because the rule governing the practice of witchcraft culture does not register the signification of the term. People in the witchcraft culture might merely acknowledge terms like "sacrifice" or "immolate". But "suppress" belongs to an outside conceptual scheme and practice. As Winch said,

> (…) the relation between idea and context is an internal one. The idea gets its sense from the role it plays in the system. It is nonsensical to take several systems of ideas, find an element in each which can be expressed in the same verbal form, and then claim to have discovered an idea which is common to all the systems. This would be like observing that both the

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> Aristotelian and Galilean systems of mechanics use a notion force, and concluding that they therefore make use of the same notion. (Ibid.:107)

Even though my example does not concern the same verbal form in different systems of ideas, it reflects that Winch's analysis traps us in the overloaded normative practice where criticism grounded on the external fact about the lives within turns out to be nonsense. But it is absurd to pay no heed to such a fact. I suggest we need the non-intentionally overloaded thick view as a way out.

3. The Non-Intentionally Overloaded Thick View (NTV)

The NTV partly shares Winch's thick view in that it requires the idea of rules engaged within practices. However, Winch's thick view is insufficient to avoid the dilemma of Scylla. What we need is an engagement with rules, the kind of which is objective and not independently characterised from the engagement. Such rules need to be characterized based on regularities of behaviour, but not reducible. However, as we are a part of the behaviour that is an object of our study, whether we are aware of it or not, the notion of practice cannot be a thin notion.

The idea I employ here is Haslanger's view on social practices, which she defines as "... ways of organizing ourselves either towards some end or in response to a coordination or access problem." (Haslanger 2013:10). In other words, practices are patterns of behaviour and normative; they can be right or wrong depending on the purpose we share in living together. Haslanger's notion of practice is a sort of NTV because it is possible that as we repeatedly follow the rules, we are not always aware of which rule we follow. We do it immediately, but we are also aware of what it is to do things correctly or incorrectly.

What keeps practices the way they are is how we interpret each other and the material world, that is, how we posit social meanings under the 'structure' of practices. For Haslanger, social meanings are embedded in our cultures and constrain both individual and collective actions. They are schemas that we learned in language, especially the language of classification, e.g., 'slut', 'mother', and 'woman' (Ibid.). In the case of conflicting practices, the question

is how we know that the social meanings we live with are problematic, so that we need to replace them with other concepts. How do we know that the social meaning of "sacrifice" in a witchcraft culture actually means "suppress" viewing from different conceptual schemes? Haslanger's answer is

> Suppose that through normative inquiry we determine that a particular social practice is misguided and unjust. One question we should ask is how our discursive practice are implicated: how does our language support the categorization that the social practice relies on? Does it prime us to respond in ways that are problematic, e.g., to stigmatize or idealize? (Ibid.: 17)

The answer here might sound circular, for it seems that we need to be in a position outside the practice we are in first in order to recognize the 'unjust'. However, as Haslanger suggests, social practices are purposeful; for example, in easing our life to live together, one might say that the obstruction of such purpose is an indicator of the recognition of the 'unjust'. Such an obstruction comes from the way we recognize that social meanings contain an element of stereotypical meanings, i.e. fixed meaning, so that it affects our attitudes and behaviour.

However, according to Haslanger, besides the stereotypical meanings, social meanings also contain their extensional meaning, which tracks truth (Ibid.: 19). For the ameliorativist view, in order to improve the unfairness, social changes require the change of social meanings in both directions – the stereotypical meaning and the extensional meaning. As Haslanger said, "… philosophical inquiry is an inquiry into the concepts we (collectively) ought to use." (Ibid.: 22). "So we should be asking not simply what concepts track truth, even fundamental truth, but rather: What distinctions and classifications should we use to organize ourselves collectively? What social meanings should we endorse?" (Ibid.: 23)

The last question appears to address the issue of incommensurability that we faced in the earlier discussion on Diamond and Winch. If there are conflicting social meanings or language games, we should choose which one. Which game should we play? What criteria should we adopt for choosing? An answer is already determined by the ameliorative aim. That is to better our collective

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life. We need different rules that create different regularities. However, it might be questioned whether this is another Scylla situation where rules are mere interpretations. The question is how the rule that is both objective and not independently characterized from practice can be realized.

The answer might be found in the disjunctive account of direct realism. The element of truth-tracking in social meanings simply grows from the way one 'perceives' how things are disjunctively. Our perceptual experiences are trained by the practice we are familiar with. It is the habit, the regularities of responding to the world in the way we are accustomed to. However, what constrains the experiences is the causal properties of things in the world. It can be taken as the 'phenomenal regularities' or "a regularity of behavior that emerges from the real causal properties of a thing, but that does not itself give rise to or constrain the things' behavior" (Little 1993:187). An example is "glass flows slowly" (ibid.). It is the sort of regularity resulting from the causal properties of glass. It can be lawlike in the counterfactual sense (e.g., if a material is not glass, its physical properties do not flow slowly.); but is not the result of deterministic natural laws. The notion of phenomenal regularities resembles Kripke's notion of a posteriori necessity, which depends on our epistemic abilities. For example, it is metaphysically necessary that in all possible worlds, Aristotle is identical to Aristotle. But epistemically, Aristotle might not be the teacher of Alexander the Great in a possible world. For a natural kind term like 'glass', it is a posteriori necessity that 'glass' is identical to objects that expand slowly because the causal properties of 'glass' might be different in possible worlds.

My point in bringing in the notion of 'phenomenal regularities' is to show how an account of normative but not overloaded practices is possible. If Haslanger is right, then social practices are the means through which social structure exerts its causal power since it has the capacity to produce phenomenal regularities which affect individual and collective action. It is therefore important that we acknowledge the reality of the patterns of behaviour, such as repeated instances of maltreatment behaviours, that individuals experience as the effect of a social structure. This means that the NTV entails realism about social structure.

It may be argued that the NTV faces the circularity problem, that is, behavior regularities are assumed to be the effect of some causal properties of a social structure before it is known whether such properties exist. There might be some kind of patterns or regularities for a certain period, but it is uncertain whether these regularities are necessarily caused by something. However, as mentioned above, this objection is implausible if the regularities in question are taken as phenomenal regularities that can be stated as counterfactual conditions and do not assume deterministic general laws as the cause of regularities.

4. Conclusion

Based on McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein's rule-following argument, the way out of the paradox of rule-following is in a direct grasp of rules without interpretation, that is, in 'habit', 'custom' or 'the meeting of minds' or social practices. I have argued that the most plausible account of social practices is the non-intentionally overloaded thick view because it does not fall into the dilemmatic situation of Scylla and Charybdis. Other types of reading of the rule-following argument, i.e. Winch and Diamond, fail to offer the way out of the dilemma. The NTV is most apt for the ameliorative aim of doing philosophy, although there might be a circularity problem. However, I have argued that the sort of regularities in need is phenomenal regularities, which can avoid such a problem.

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