

What Is a Rule? An Analysis of Rules and Music in Wittgensteinian Thought

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Even in music, the art for which Wittgenstein had the greatest feeling, he showed above all a great understanding . . . When he played music with others . . . his interest was in getting it right, in using his acutely sensitive ear to impose upon his fellow musicians an extraordinary exactitude of expression. One could even say that he was not interested in creating music, but in re-creating it. (Monk 240)

The tremendous affinity Ludwig Wittgenstein exhibited for music is undeniable. His interest in re-creating music is an expression of the blending of this affinity and the concept of rules within his philosophical work. It is evident from the manner in which he integrated music into the body of his work that music not only occupied a primary position within his life, but also was present in his thought process. Wittgenstein insisted upon the fact that there had been six great composers: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, and Labor, and their music permeated his life and his mind (Monk 8). Wittgenstein's work regarding rules illustrates the presence of music within his philosophy. Wittgenstein's discussion of how one learns a rule is indicative not only of what a rule is, but of the impossibility of providing an analytic definition for it, and the necessity of the use of examples both in learning rules and in understanding what they are. Furthermore, the implications of this discussion can be accurately depicted using examples from the compositions of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms, and within the music of these composers, Wittgenstein's manner of doing philosophy is embodied.

The introduction of music into Wittgenstein's philosophical exploration of language is justifiable not only as a result of its intricate involvement in his life, but also due to the evidence of it in Wittgenstein's work.

“Understanding a musical phrase may also be called understanding a language,” he wrote (RPP2 par. 503). Wittgenstein exhibited his belief in this principle through repeated utilization of music as a device with which to describe the concept of language. Wittgenstein approaches language primarily through the notion of a language-game, in which he finds the analogy of the rules of language and the rules of games particularly productive. The concept of a rule, in Wittgenstein’s work, is a family-resemblance concept, which indicates that there is no essence to rules, only common features or resemblances (PG 116–17). Thus, the pursuit of a definition of a rule is futile, but the discovery of a rule’s features is best displayed by the process in which we learn those rules.

The comparison of speaking language to playing a game is fundamental to the apprehension of the manner in which rules are learned. Wittgenstein compares the game of chess to the speaking of language: speaking to playing chess, words to chess pieces, explanations of words to the rules of chess, and meanings of words to the powers of chess pieces (Baker 154). In consideration of Wittgensteinian musical tendencies, this concept can be productively employed musically: speaking is like playing a Beethoven sonata, words are notes, explanations of words are the rules of music (largely the relationship of notes in a score to hand movement, according to Wittgenstein) and meanings of words are the powers of symbols indicating such things as dynamics and tempo. They are put to use both in deciding and recognizing how to play the composition and in playing it, and so they are in a sense transparent to the musician.

Due to the fact that an analytic definition cannot be provided for a family-resemblance concept, Wittgenstein asserted that rules are a concept best explained by examples (Glock 324). Parallel to this is the fact that individual rules are learned primarily by example. Wittgenstein states that we learn the meaning of a word by example, and the grammatical position of words is provided by such examples (PG 118). He says, “For doesn’t the technique (the *possibility*) of training someone else in following it belong to the following of a rule? To be sure, by means of examples . . . How do you follow the rule?—‘I do it like *this*; . . . ‘ and now there follow general explanations and examples” (RFM 418). Wittgenstein provides another example: “a gesture, a tone of voice, as in which the teacher uses in a particular way in giving instruction, and which the pupils imitate” (RFM 348). In addition, he points to instances in which one is not actually told the rules but learns the rule “by watching others play” (PI pars. 31, 54).

The use of the phrase “do the same” is a function of teaching a rule by example: “I shall teach him to use the words by means of examples . . . I do it, he does it after me; and I influence him by expressions of agreement, rejection, expectation, encouragement” (PI par. 208). Wittgenstein

describes the use of the words “rule” and “same” as interwoven because the rule is the determining factor for what is considered “doing the same” in this instance (PI par. 225 and RPP2 par. 408.). The student has learned the rule when she is able to follow the example and “do the same.”

If a musical instructor is teaching a student the rule of dynamics using Brahms’ “Waltz in A Flat,” the instructor may best impart the rule by playing the crescendo for the student, progressing from pianissimo to forte and then back again to pianissimo. The student will learn the rule of dynamics by concurrently following the dynamic notation in the text visually, and aurally noting the corresponding volume change in the notes.

Regarding the analysis of the manner in which one learns a rule, it is essential to ascertain that one has, in fact, learned the rule. How does the instructor confirm that the student has learned the rule? Wittgenstein addresses this in reference to the consequent action taken by the student: “he exclaims ‘Now I can go on!’—So this capacity, this understanding, is something that makes its appearance in a moment” (PI par. 151). He also evaluates the significance of this ability: “my being so certain of being able to go on is naturally very important” (RFM 37). One who is able to “go on” has been trained to take the same step their instructor took when he encounters a scenario in which the rule is present. Thus, the student’s understanding is “manifest in his actions” (Baker and Hacker 97).

“The word ‘agreement’ and the word ‘rule’ are related,” according to Wittgenstein: “The phenomena of agreement and of acting according to a rule hang together” (RFM 344). The fact that the student’s actions are in agreement with the instructor’s exemplary actions is an indication that the student has learned the rule. However, Wittgenstein is careful to point out that “one does not learn to obey a rule by learning the use of the word ‘agreement.’ Rather, one learns the meaning of ‘agreement’ by learning to follow a rule.” Wittgenstein says this process is “the phenomenon of a kind of instruction, of shewing how and of imitation.” True to his focus upon the implications of language, he points to the use of the term “and so on,” saying it can only be used “when the other is as capable of going on as I am, i.e., does go on just as I do” (RFM 405, 345, 349). It would be nonsensical for the instructor to use the term “and so on” unless the student had learned the rule.

Wittgenstein says, “the pupil shews that he is using the rule we have given him to pass from the printed to the spoken words” (PI par. 162). Likewise, in music the student shows that he has learned the rule when he uses it to pass from the printed rule in a score to playing the music in accordance with the rule. Beethoven’s *Sonata in C Minor Op. 13 “Pathétique,”* the most famous of his early piano sonatas, applies one of Haydn’s compositional practices in the employment of the brooding, slow introduction.

It is recalled twice in later stages of the first movement and requires a keen understanding of tempo. In this case, the student displays the fact that he has learned the rule of tempo by playing the introduction at the slow tempo each time it is recalled. The student has thus learned to apply the rule of playing the correct tempo in the same way it was applied by Beethoven when he composed *Pathétique*. This is further supported by a statement Wittgenstein made in regard to the meaning of a word during a 1939 lecture in Cambridge: "To know its meaning is to use it in the same way as other people do" (Malcolm 171).

A proper analysis of the Wittgensteinian concept of rules requires a determination of what "following a rule" is. Wittgenstein emphasizes the importance of the learning process in regard to this: "What the correct following of a rule consists in cannot be described *more closely* than by describing the *learning* of 'proceeding according to the rule'" (RFM 392). Wittgenstein also articulates the fact that rule-following is related to ability (PG 188 and PI par. 495). To comprehend a rule, one must be able to determine what acts are in accord with it and be capable of defending his behavior if called upon to make it intelligible. The conclusion that one is capable of following a rule, or of guiding himself by reference to a rule can be drawn when he explains his actions by citing the rule, conducts a self-evaluation when he fails to follow the rule and corrects himself accordingly. Thus, "to understand a rule is to be master of the technique of its application" (Baker and Hacker 159, 45, 161).

Schubert's "Moment Musicaux No.3," with an expansive melody and evocative harmony typical of Schubert's piano sonatas, requires a particularly acute understanding of the rule of staccato notes.²⁶ In order to play the composition correctly, the student must recognize the symbol that denotes this rule in the written notation and exhibit understanding of its meaning in his playing. By displaying the ability to do this, the student exemplifies a mastery of the technique of following a rule.

Comprehension of the relationship between one's understanding of a rule and the action in which one follows it is particularly significant to Wittgenstein's conception of a rule. Wittgenstein writes, "Only in the practice of a language can a word have meaning" (RFM 344). Likewise, only in the practice of following a rule can one understand its meaning. This concept is somewhat confusing to comprehend, because in scenarios in which the scientific method is applied, the opposite is true. One can gather and understand data without accepting or understanding the hypothesis. However, one's understanding of a rule is not independent of how it is applied in one's actions (Baker and Hacker 97). If one is mistaken about what a rule is, one is also mistaken about what following a rule is.

An excellent illustration of this relationship is exemplified in the student's understanding of the rule of time signatures within Haydn's "Andantino," a composition exhibiting Haydn's inexhaustible originality. If the student does not comprehend the implications of having six beats in a measure with the eighth note getting the beat, she will be mistaken in the way she plays the piece. It would be incorrect to assert that the student could follow the rule and play in 6/8 time if she did not understand the rule of 6/8 time.

The connection between understanding and following a rule supports Wittgenstein's assertion that a word's meaning is its use in the language (PI 43). The application of a rule embodies its meaning, like the application of a word embodies its meaning. In search of a definition for a rule, one may attempt to look further, not realizing that the rule is understood in the process by which it is followed. Wittgenstein's comments regarding the function of a rule illustrate this:

But how can I explain the nature of a rule to myself? The difficult thing here is not, to dig down to the ground; no, it is to recognize the ground that lies before us as the ground. For the ground keeps on giving the illusory image of a greater depth, and when we seek to reach this, we keep on finding ourselves on the old level. Our disease is a disease of wanting to explain. (RFM 333)

In reference to the question of what a rule is, Wittgenstein's comments support the learning-based inquiry: "Once you have described the procedure of this teaching and learning, you have said everything that can be said about acting correctly according to a rule" (RFM 392). He further expounds upon this view using a specific example: "What 'determining the length' means is not learned by learning what *length* and *determining* are; the meaning of the word 'length' is learnt by learning, among other things, what it is to determine length" (PI 225). Applying this specifically to the question of a rule, one could conclude that what a rule is cannot be learned by searching for the essence of "rule," for it does not possess an essence, nor can it be clarified by formulating an analytic definition. Rather, the meaning of "rule" is learned by learning what it is to follow a rule. By this standard, the line of inquiry exploring the process of learning rules by examples and the meaning of following a rule is productive.

When Wittgenstein describes the process of teaching one to follow a rule, he describes teaching by example, and elaborates on the description with the following remarks: "Does this mean that 'following a rule' is indefinable? No. I can surely define it in countless ways. Only definitions are of no use to me in these considerations" (RFM 321). One could define a rule as "a standard of correctness," or "a standard which governs a multiplicity of occasions," but as Wittgenstein points out, these definitions serve no

purpose. The question “What is a rule?” is best answered in the analysis of examples because the rule “speaks through my application of it” (Pears 441). Not only are individual rules best taught by example, but the concept of a rule is best taught by example.

As with almost every topic he addresses, Wittgenstein saw strong correlations between the rules of language and music: “Verbal language contains a strong musical element,” he stated (RPP1 par. 888). After an analysis of the concept of understanding through its manifestation in a picture, Wittgenstein again found music a primary tool for the examination of language: “Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think . . . Why is just *this* the pattern of variation in loudness and tempo? . . . In order to ‘explain’ I could only compare it with something else which has the same rhythm” (PI par. 527). In his discussion of change of aspect, music is used again as an illustration: “‘You have to hear this bar as an introduction’; ‘You must hear it in this key’; ‘You must phrase it like *this*’” (PI 202).

Wittgenstein’s analysis of a rule has far-reaching implications for the field of philosophy. It was Wittgenstein’s view that the analysis of language use could clarify concepts, ultimately leading to the solutions of philosophical problems, and that the concept of a rule is central to achieving these ends. By asserting that a rule cannot be analytically defined, but must be understood by example, Wittgenstein embraces the technique of description, as opposed to explanation, which he believes is of tremendous importance: “We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems . . . solved . . . by looking into the workings of our language” (PI par. 109).

It is his contention that philosophers lay down rules, and when they follow them, “things do not turn out” as they had assumed. Thus, philosophers are entangled in rules of their own making: “This entanglement in our rules is what we want to understand.” Proper understanding of a rule helps the philosopher get untangled and leaves everything “open to view” so that “there is nothing to explain” (PI par. 125–26 and Suter 22, 94). In this sense, rules are both the source of and the solution to philosophical problems.

In addition to the implications Wittgenstein’s analysis of a rule has for the big picture of philosophy, it also impacts his own body of work. The concept of a rule reinforces Wittgenstein’s analysis of many other concepts. In the private language argument, one of his contentions is that private language is an impossibility because rule-following presupposes the existence of regular practices (PI par. 258, 265). Also in the private language argument, his assertion that it is impossible to obey a

rule privately is supported by the distinction between following a rule and thinking one is following a rule (PI par. 202).

As discussed previously, the concept that a word's meaning is its use in language is illustrated by the presentation of a rule as a concept best defined by examples; the meaning of a rule is found in its use (PI par. 43). Perhaps most obviously, the family resemblance concept is illustrated by rules, supporting his assertion that language has no essence (PI par. 66).

"In my father's house there were seven grand pianos," Wittgenstein once remarked—a reflection of his love of music and the influence it had upon his character, both of which in turn contributed to the manner in which he engaged in doing philosophy (Monk 278). Though in fact there is said to have been only three or four grand pianos at the house, Wittgenstein's extensive knowledge and deep connection to music is evident. The six composers whom he considered "great" were the only ones he considered great, a fact confirmed by his behavior when he attended a concert featuring the music of Brahms, Strauss, Beethoven, and Bach. A friend in attendance with him reported that Wittgenstein "enjoyed the Brahms, refused to go in for the Strauss, and left the hall as soon as the Beethoven had finished" (Monk 61).

Wittgenstein's philosophy manifests some of the most unique characteristics of their music. Brahms concerned himself largely with creating music of "inherent unity" while utilizing unusual effects to enhance the internal structure of his compositions. Wittgenstein's concepts do have unity, and his unusual technique of presenting them in aphorisms ultimately strengthens their viability. The compositions of Schubert tend to establish a balance between the intellectual and emotional levels of interpretation while displaying bold, free forms instead of set patterns. Likewise, the writing of Wittgenstein along with his style of teaching is indicative of both the intellectual and emotional aspects of human thought, and certainly is possessive of a bold, free format. Haydn's balance of directness and bold experimentation in his compositions transformed instrumental expression in the eighteenth century, just as Wittgenstein's work has transformed philosophical expression in the twentieth century.

Perhaps the characteristics one encounters in a study of Wittgenstein's philosophy are most effectively illustrated by Mozart's *Rondo alla Turca*, with its lively and dramatic contrasts in tempo and tone. In reference to change of aspect, Wittgenstein wrote, "The reinterpretation of a facial expression can be compared to the reinterpretation of a chord in music, when we hear it as a modulation first into this, then into that key" (PI par. 536). The repeated modulations between minor and major keys in *Rondo* embody not only Wittgenstein's words here, but the multiple layers of thought and understanding that must be examined in his work.

The composer he held in highest esteem is of particular importance in this illustration, for Wittgenstein argued that “if he is to behave like Beethoven, he ought, like Beethoven, to produce really great work” (Monk 89). In addressing the concept of the dawning of an aspect, Wittgenstein says: “I have a theme played to me several times and each time in a slower tempo. In the end I say ‘*Now* it’s right’, or ‘*Now* at last it’s a march’, ‘*Now* at last it’s a dance” (PI par. 206). Beethoven’s early piano sonatas have a forceful, bold quality indicative of the extensive process of refinement they underwent. The manner in which Wittgenstein repeatedly refined his work and progressed through a concept with clarity of vision is a sign of the same boldness and determination. Like the theme in Wittgenstein’s example, both Beethoven and Wittgenstein presented their work repeatedly to themselves until, “*Now* at last”—it became a great work.

Wittgenstein’s work indicates that a rule is not to be understood by definition, but by examples. The rules of music illustrate this process in the concepts of learning a rule and following a rule, and in the relationship between understanding and following rules. Brahms and dynamics, Beethoven and tempo, Schubert and staccato, and Haydn and time signature serve as examples that not only are indicative of these concepts, but also illustrate what a rule is. The compositions of Wittgenstein’s “great” composers also illustrate his philosophy, in which the concept of a rule has provided far-reaching implications both within his own body of work and for the entire field of philosophy. Music is a powerful tool for analysis in regard to these implications, because it forms a bridge between Ludwig Wittgenstein and his philosophy.

Wittgenstein once described to his mentor, Bertrand Russell, the admiration he had for Russell’s monumental work, *Principia Mathematica*. He spoke of its beauty with tremendous feeling, “and said—what was probably the highest praise he could give it—that it was like music” (Monk 44). In conclusion, the likeness of Wittgenstein’s work to music is inherently clear, for in his words, “Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination” (PI par. 6).

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