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# Wittgenstein and Repetition

**Abstract:** “I myself still find my way of philosophizing new, & it keeps striking me so afresh, & that is why I have to repeat myself so often. [...] [R]epetitions [...] [f]or me [...] are necessary.” (CV 1998: 3e) Wittgenstein’s style is well known for its recursive—and according to some interpreters, even obsessive-compulsive—quality, but they are part of a thinking method: “I suggest repetition as a means of surveying the connections.” (AWL 1979: 43) The style also mirrors recurring ideas such as “concepts are not for use on a single occasion” (Z 1981: 568), or the “bustle (*Getriebe*) of life [...] comes about only through constant repetition” (RPP 1980b: 625–626).

The aim of this essay is to show how the notion of repetition (*Wiederholung*) plays a significant role in the evolution of Wittgenstein’s thought. It is the manifestation of a philosophical praxis, and although the notion of repetition remains in the background, it is a constant presence in his production, often featuring alongside his best-known concepts, like rule following, aspect seeing, and his thoughts on music and mathematics. This article will examine the different ways in which Wittgenstein reflects on the question of repetition in relation to the idea of identity, variation, and diversity, and as a fundamental aspect of human practice that is not the mere manifestation of underlying rules or principles, but a necessary condition for their emergence.

## 1 Introduction

In the philosophical tradition, the problem of repetition is often related to the issue of something being the same in different occurrences, of identity in difference. In Heraclitean philosophy, for instance, life is an ever-changing flux into which one can never step twice, and since there are never two identical separate events, repetition is impossible. The metaphor of the flow also appears in several observations in Wittgenstein’s texts with reference to the limits of language in capturing the stream of experience. However, in other passages, Wittgenstein judges the Heraclitean problem to be a typical philosophical illusion: we do have repetitions of

experiences, and negating this is the product of a false philosophical assumption.<sup>1</sup> This is an issue that engaged key thinkers, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, during Wittgenstein's intellectual development (see Watts 2017).<sup>2</sup> Less known, but no less important, are Ernst Mach and Fritz Mauthner's perspectives on repetition as a fundamental principle in their epistemological and linguistic investigations. I will outline their contribution. However, it is not the purpose of this essay to explore the analogies with more contemporary thinkers; the research literature has already discussed the affinities of certain aspects of Wittgenstein's thought with philosophers dealing with the issue of repetition, such as Heidegger (cf. Guidi 2021), Deleuze (cf. Puhl 2004; Due 2011), and in particular, Jacques Derrida (cf. Staten 1985; Rowlands 1993; Bearn 1995) and his reflection on *iterability* (cf. Derrida 1988) on which I will make a short reference in the conclusion. However, for the development of any systematic comparison between these theories and the Wittgensteinian position, it is first necessary to offer an overview of the actual role of the notion of 'repetition' in his texts.

We already find reflections on repetition in Wittgenstein's early annotations regarding logical-mathematical issues, but they are also found in scattered remarks on music and in later reflections that revolve around the nature of life forms. Forms of life are comparable to a "filigree pattern" (*filigranes Muster*) (RPP 1980b: 624) that constitutes the "bustle [*Getriebe*] of life" which "comes about only through constant repetition" (*nur durch ständige Wiederholung ergibt sich das Getriebe*; RPP 1980b: 625–626). 'Repetition' has of course a different sense in these remarks; the variation of this notion follows, in fact, the evolutions of his thought. However, it will be argued that these different uses of the concept do not diverge from Wittgenstein's main ideas regarding how repetition should be interpreted and how it is constitutive for the emergence of meaning.

## 2 Repetition as Thinking Style and Method

The notion of repetition could also be considered an important connecting point between Wittgenstein's philosophical method, his style of thought, and his general

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1 "That all is in flux seems to prevent us from expressing the truth, for it is as though we can't get hold of it, since it slips away from us. But it doesn't prevent us from expressing something. [...] The man who said that one couldn't step twice in the same river, said something false. One can step twice into the same river. And that's how the solution of all philosophical difficulties looks." (Ms 110: 33 f.; transl. by David Stern [1995: 168].)

2 According to Fremstedal (2006), there are strong indications that Wittgenstein read, among other books, Kierkegaard's *Repetition*.

theoretical issues. Today it is possible to take a broad look at Wittgenstein's work due to the publication of his complete writings, the editions of his students' notes, and the possibility of digitally exploring the archive of his notebooks and typescripts. Alois Pichler, one of the *Nachlass*'s editors and the coordinator of the digitization program, points out that systematic repetition is the most striking aspect emerging from the whole archive, and it connects the philosopher's method of work and his style; Wittgenstein developed notes in his diaries and notebooks by taking up thoughts and phrases from previous notes. Within the notes, fragments are varied, combined, and re-inserted into an ever-evolving flow. "One could even say that the Wittgenstein *Nachlass* consists of nothing but a great number of different versions and modifications of a relatively small set of primary units of text or of thought [...]" (Pichler 2001) Worth noting is the philosopher's technique of varying the meaning of one remark within the same paragraph or on the same page and developing it in new directions. We may describe Wittgenstein's repetitiveness as an obsessive-compulsive style (cf. Golub 2014<sup>3</sup>); its main feature consists in writing as a performative philosophical practice in which the repeated use of pressing questions forms a textual interweaving that never leads to a definitive conclusion. Examples and thoughts are presented, discussed, modified into new forms, and re-enacted. From the standpoint of his language style, his text is peppered with formulas expressing an ongoing thought, made of lists, series of examples, use of suspension dots, and expressions like 'etc.,' 'and so on' (*und so weiter und so fort*), and 'again and again' (*immer wieder sehe ich, immer wieder komme ich auf ...*).

Wittgenstein was well aware of the idiosyncrasies of his philosophical style, which he likened to a "bad musical composition" (CV 1998: 45e). In a 1929 note (Ms 105: 46c, in CV 1998: 3e), he observes:

I myself still find my way of philosophizing new, & it keeps striking me so afresh, & that is why I have to repeat myself so often. It will have become part of the flesh & blood of a new generation & it will find the repetitions boring. For me they are necessary.

This statement concerns not only the formal aspect of his style but the way his theoretical inquiries progress. Even a superficial exploration of the *Nachlass* shows that the philosopher's directions of thought do not consist of systematic and linear paths but are organized as a complicated intertextual network. The possibility of hypertextual search in the digitalized archives fits perfectly with the dense fabric of internal cross-references that are distinctive of Wittgenstein's style. In the so-

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<sup>3</sup> "It is for me an obsessive-compulsive performance behavior that has previously gone undiagnosed in Wittgenstein's therapeutic philosophy." (Golub 2014: 218)

called *Yellow Book*, a remark dated around October 1933 is straightforward in making this point:

There is a truth in Schopenhauer's view that philosophy is an organism, and that a book on philosophy, with a beginning and an end, is a sort of contradiction. One difficulty with philosophy is that we lack a synoptic view. We encounter the kind of difficulty we should have with the geography of a country for which we had no map [...]. [W]e do not know the country except by knowing the connections between the roads. So I suggest repetition as a means of surveying the connections. (AWL 1979: 43)

Wittgenstein's thoughts develop in a ceaseless textual journey of revisions and rearrangements. The interweaving of recurring thoughts is never a repetition of the same issues but is an attempt to map them out by traversing the territory from multiple directions. His thinking follows a rhythmic pattern based on varied repetitions to search for new connections and perspectives:

In philosophy, we are not laying foundations but tidying up a room, in the process of which we have to touch everything a dozen times. The only way to do philosophy is to do everything twice. (LWL 1980: 24)

### 3 Rhythm and Music

References to repetition also appear in several remarks about music and its analogies with language:

"The repeat is *necessary*" [*Die Wiederholung ist notwendig*]. In what respect is it necessary? Well, sing it, then you will see that it is only the repeat that gives it its tremendous power. (CV 1998: 59e)

His interest in the problem of repetition, when linked to rhythmicity, might also be put in relation to his experiments on subjective rhythm conducted as a young student in Cambridge between 1912 and 1913 at the laboratory of Charles Myers. The experiments aimed to determine the conditions under which subjects could perceive a rhythm in a sequence of variable or irregular beats. The philosopher would later dismiss these investigations as insignificant, yet they anticipate issues such as aspect seeing, the centrality of which would emerge decades later (cf. Guter 2020: 30). The organisation of rhythmic repetition shows how a similar sequence of events can be perceptually organized in various ways. Through repetition, order and organisation emerge from a sequence as a 'gestalt' quality, not only by changing the perspective in which the repetition is perceived, but also through slight variations of the sequence itself.

The centrality of repetition in music is a crucial analogy to the role of repetition in language, since “[u]nderstanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think” (PI 2009: 527). Repetition allows a theme to be incorporated into the “rhythm of our language”:

And yet there just *is* no paradigm there other than the theme. And yet again there *is* a paradigm other than the theme: namely, the rhythm of our language, of our thinking & feeling. And furthermore, the theme is a *new* part of our language, it becomes incorporated in it; we learn a new *gesture*. (CV 1998: 59e)

As an amateur musicologist, Wittgenstein expressed his well-known conservative taste in music that included, among others, Johannes Brahms—who was historically referred to by critics as the ‘master of variations’—and Franz Schubert (the philosopher’s favourite composer), known for his regular structures in which identical parts are repeated in different ways in the same composition. According to Eggers (cf. 2011: 32), Schubert’s harmonic modulations are a musical illustration of Wittgenstein’s idea of making new aspects appear by means of varied repetitions. The expressivity of a motif or idea is enhanced by bringing new aspects to light by means of variations on the same theme. This illustrates the point to which we will return later: variation is not an imperfection of repetition but assumes an essential role in the process of both musical and conceptual understanding (cf. Eggers 2013: 391).

## 4 From Mach to Mauthner

In what sense, according to Wittgenstein’s musical analogies, is repetition essential for understanding? In this regard, it is helpful to clarify the perspectives of some key figures of the scientific and cultural milieu which influenced Wittgenstein’s thinking. The musicological experiments on rhythm in 1912–13 follow a long tradition of research in phenomenology, psychophysics of sensation, and empirical aesthetics that originated in the second half of the nineteenth century. This includes Carl Stumpf’s *Tonpsychologie*, Theodor Fechner’s psychophysics, and research by Emil Hering, Hermann von Helmholtz, Christian von Ehrenfels, and, notably, by Ernst Mach. Attention to the mechanisms of perceptual organisation was a crucial issue in philosophical and scientific discussions confronting the Kantian tradition. Positivism and developments in phenomenism manifested in this regard a strong anti-foundationalist tension that was especially prominent in the main representatives of Viennese modernity who shaped the cultural background in which Wittgenstein’s thought developed.

Among the representatives of that milieu, one of the most important figures was Ernst Mach (cf. Janik & Toulmin 1973: 133). Mach argued that reality can only be grasped as a complex of sensory perceptions and not of substances and objects. Natural laws should only be considered as schematic generalisations of a Heraclitean flow of singularly unique and unrepeatable events (cf. Mach 1900: 152). Contrary to the Kantian perspective, Mach's empirio-criticism does not postulate permanent principles but is based on an 'economy of thought' (*Denkökonomie*). Reality is the result of structuring processes that follow the principles of perceptual regularity and simplicity: "Nature exists once only. Our schematic mental imitation alone produces like events" (*Die Natur ist nur einmal da. Nur unser schematisches Nachbilden erzeugt gleiche Fälle*, Mach 1896: 216; Engl. transl. 1898: 199). In *Knowledge and Error*, Mach emphasizes the role of repetition as the basis of epistemological stability: "After the acts of attention have encompassed the most varied experiences, we become acquainted with temporal sensation as permanent and independent of the remaining experiential content, and as constantly recurring [*immer wiederholend*]." (Mach 1905: 424; Engl. transl. 1976: 336) Only this way does the disordered flow of sensations stabilize at a point where we can distinguish repeated phenomena; at the price, however, of a slight falsification of reality.

Mach's anti-metaphysical position strongly influenced thinkers who would translate his epistemological question into the linguistic domain, as in the case of Fritz Mauthner (1849–1923) and, later, of Wittgenstein himself (cf. Berlage 1994: 156). For Mauthner (influenced by Mach during the time the latter was a professor at the University of Prague), the problem of repetition becomes the starting point for a radical theory of cognitive and linguistic instability, accentuating Mach's ideas toward a radical form of scepticism and nominalism. In his *Contributions to the Critique of Language* (*Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, 1901–02), Mauthner describes language as an unreliable tool working through associative mechanisms that try to capture the flow of experience. There is no guarantee of semantic stability between historically and culturally distant speakers, nor within the individual speaker in different moments of his/her personal experience. Meanings undergo a continual slippage of which we are mostly unaware:

[...] this whole path has gone through endless uncounted repetitions of use by individuals, and —as I hope to have shown— not even the repetition of the word by one individual has been possible without a slightest change of meaning. (Transl. E.A.)<sup>4</sup>

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4 "[...] dieser ganze Weg ist durch endlos ungezählte Wiederholungen des Gebrauchs bei Einzelmenschen gegangen, und – das hoffe ich dargetan zu haben – nicht einmal die Wiederholung des

Similar to Mach's argument, repetition is a principle that apparently guarantees the stability of phenomena. However, according to Mauthner, this is only the basis for further illusions:

Deeply rooted in all of us is the belief in regularity. Certainly, because without some regular repetition our perceptions could not turn into ideas; we could not think. So our belief exaggerates regularities almost mythologically in order to enable us to think. (Transl. E.A.)<sup>5</sup>

For Mach, the uniqueness of sensory events does not preclude the emergence of descriptive laws and models, while Mauthner deems regularity as a nominalist illusion determined by putting labels on ever-varying phenomena, leading to the fallacious belief in their referential stability. It is the iterated practice of language that determines the illusion of stability: "One could therefore say: frequent exercise or repetition constitutes the use of language; but to do so would obscure the interesting fact that in reality the exercise is a kind of *causa sui* [...]" (transl. E.A.)<sup>6</sup> and "Only the representation of an order, that is, of a repetition of similar phenomena, is something we apparently find objectively in our heads." (Transl. E.A.)<sup>7</sup> Therefore, according to Mauthner, even the mechanism of repetition and regularity needs to be met with suspicion. The illusion of stability 'in our heads' allows language to maintain a semblance of meaning, but at the cost of permanent mystification and misunderstanding that only a thorough *Sprachkritik* could attempt to unravel.

We see reflections of this thinking in some of Wittgenstein's remarks concerning the Heraclitean metaphor of flow: "What belongs to the essence of the world cannot be expressed by language. For this reason, it cannot say that everything flows. Language can only say those things that we can also imagine otherwise." (PR 1975: 54) However, as mentioned in the introduction, Wittgenstein distances himself from Mauthner, whose scepticism was the typical product of philosophical illusion:

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Worts durch den Einzelmenschen ist ohne einen Minimalbedeutungswandel möglich gewesen." (Mauthner 1901–02, II: 261)

5 "Tief eingewurzelt in uns allen ist der Glaube an Regelmäßigkeit. Natürlich, denn ohne eine gewisse regelmäßige Wiederholung könnten unsere Wahrnehmungen sich nicht in Vorstellungen verwandeln, könnten wir nicht denken. Unser Glaube übertreibt die Regelmäßigkeiten fast mythologisch, um uns nur denken lassen zu können." (Mauthner 1901–02, II: 321)

6 "Man könnte dafür sagen: die Einübung oder die häufige Wiederholung erzeuge den Sprachgebrauch; dabei würde aber gerade das interessante Moment verdunkelt werden, dass wirklich die Einübung etwas wie eine *causa sui* [...] ist." (Mauthner 1901–02, II: 549)

7 "Nur die Vorstellung einer Ordnung, das heißt einer Wiederholung von ähnlichen Erscheinungen finden wir scheinbar objektiv in unserem Kopfe vor." (Mauthner 1901–02, III: 598)

The blurredness, indefiniteness of our sense impressions is not something that can be remedied; and it is not a blurredness to which absolute sharpness corresponds (or is opposed). Rather this general indefiniteness, intangibility, this swimming of sense impressions is what has been referred to by the expression “Everything is in flux”. (BT 2005: 448)

## 5 Tautology and Identity

Another reason why Wittgenstein does not share Mauthner’s sceptical conclusions is because their reflections on language stem from quite different perspectives: Mauthner focused on language’s psychological mechanisms, while Wittgenstein is bound to explore its logical and grammatical principles (cf. TLP 1972: 4.0031). His *Tractatus* does not deal with the epistemological question of reality as an elusive Heraclitean flow: an issue concerning the relationship between knowledge and the world. The focus is on language as a tool of representation. Take, for instance, the notion of tautology. For Mauthner, the concept of tautology is a manifestation of the dead-end that any attempt to establish language as a stable reference system runs into. According to Mauthner, if we bring “language down to its logical ideal, we would go no further than the eternal tautologies of definitions and judgments generated by them; it would be like an eternally turning mill without grain” (transl. E.A.).<sup>8</sup> Also, in everyday language, tautology means repeating the same thing twice or giving definitions that go around in a circle like an empty mill. For Wittgenstein, tautology instead denotes the set of propositions that exhibit the formal properties of language (cf. TLP 1972: 6.12). Such propositions are always true in virtue of their symbolic relations, and tautologies cannot be further defined but only shown. In other words, one can explain a tautology by presenting it (“Every tautology itself shows that it is a tautology”, TLP 1972: 6.127). Like the basic rules of games, the formal properties of language cannot be described by other propositions. We could say: ‘One can just repeat them’, showing them, at best, from a different perspective.

The notion of ‘showing’—that something shows by itself what it is—should not be equated with the idea of something being identical to itself. Wittgenstein considers the notion of (self-)identity highly problematic or even meaningless (cf. TLP 1972: 5.5303; also, in PI 2009: 216), a critique that will be central in his later reflection on the issue of rule following (cf. Kripke 1982; Malcolm 1989). A common intuition, in fact, is that following a rule involves doing the same thing repeatedly;

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<sup>8</sup> “Wenn wir die Sprache bis zu ihrem logischen Ideal fortentwickelt hätten, wir kämen mit den ewigen Tautologien von Definitionen und daraus hervorgesponnenen Urteilen nicht weiter, es wäre eine ewig sich drehende Mühle ohne Getreide.” (Mauthner 1901–02, III: 331)

for example, adding a unit in the operation  $a+1$ . Yet, according to Wittgenstein, we do not repeat the same thing, since we write a new and different number every time. Wittgenstein opposes the idea that the application of a rule is an act in which we ‘do the same thing’, namely, a case of self-identity of a general principle manifesting itself in its different applications.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein suggests seeing the application of a (logical-mathematical) rule as a mechanism of recursiveness in the use of signs: ‘The concept of successive applications of an operation is equivalent to the concept ‘and so on’’ [und so weiter] (TLP 1972: 5.2523). This would be later developed in his intuitionist and constructivist theory of mathematics, according to which operations, series, and all other mathematical entities are the product of the iterative application of rules (see Frascolla 1998). In a key passage concerning iterations and repetitions in mathematical operations (which has been transcribed and reproduced in various versions in his notes), Wittgenstein states:

What is fundamental is simply the repetition of an operation. Each stage of the repetition has its own individuality. [*Das Fundamentale ist nur die Wiederholung einer Operation. Jedes Stadium dieser Wiederholung hat seine Individualität.*]

But it isn’t as if I use the operation to move from one individual to another so that the operation would be the means for getting from one to the other – like a vehicle stopping at every number which we can then study: no, applying the operation  $+ 1$  three times yields and is the number 3. (PR 1975: 125)

In Wittgenstein’s philosophy of mathematics, calculation and mathematical entities are constructions based on rules of symbolic combination. (Self-)identity is also not a fundamental principle but the result of a specific use of the sign ‘=’. From this clear anti-Platonic standpoint, the concept of mathematical infinity, for instance, becomes merely a linguistic label that refers to iterable operations without presupposing the existence of an actual mathematical infinity. In other words, infinity is not a number, and the set of all natural numbers indicates nothing more than the recursive rule for generating them. The mathematician ‘plays a game’, and “here ‘playing’ must mean: *acting* in accordance with certain rules” (RFM 1978: V, 1). Instead, imagining entities which were determined by abstract rules would be like thinking that the game of chess always existed before it was even discovered. Contrarily, according to Wittgenstein, the properties of a mathematical entity emerge only when the object is constructed by means of operations that are iteratively applied. Those iterative operations are not the mere manifestation of underlying abstract principles that identically manifest themselves at every calculation step but are the act of carrying out those iterative operations which constitute the mathematical entities generated by those operations. Often the idea dominates that what is generated by a rule “already exist[s] in an ideal

sense before they are drawn”, “like a string of pearls in a box and he had only to pull it out. (But this kind of picture is just what is misleading us.)” (PG 1974: 18) This is even more evident for everyday language, whose rules are not as explicit and rigid as mathematical ones.

## 6 Rules, Regularity and Repetition

Wittgenstein’s well-known argument concerning rule-following deals with the objection concerning the potentially endless interpretive criteria for the application of a rule. Since rule-following is a socially embedded practice (cf. PI 2009: 199), the potentially limitless interpretations meet a pragmatical halt (cf. PI 2009: 217), which depends on collective habits of rule application exercised by constant repetition. On the one hand, there is a ‘leap’ whenever we apply a rule, a blind spot where we have no rules to follow a rule. On the other hand, such a leap is not an isolated and individual act but occurs as a collective and intersubjective practice.<sup>9</sup>

In the central paragraphs of the *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein develops his famous remarks on this topic, the assumption of regularity is emphasized by the statement that rules without repetition are not possible:

Is what we call “following a rule” something that it would be possible for only *one* person, only *once* in a lifetime, to do? – And this is, of course, a gloss on the *grammar* of the expression “to follow a rule”.

It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which only one person followed 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 follow a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (usages, institutions). (PI 2009: 199).<sup>10</sup>

Instead, if we imagine a country where the inhabitants speak a completely irregular language in which nothing is repeated, we would come to the conclusion that “[t]here is not enough regularity for us to call it ‘language’” (PI 2009: 207).

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<sup>9</sup> This may remind us not only of Kierkegaard’s thoughts on repetition but also those on the “leap of faith”: “Thinking can turn toward itself in order to think about itself and skepticism can emerge. But this thinking about itself never accomplishes anything.” (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992: 335)

<sup>10</sup> Also: “The application of the concept ‘following a rule’ presupposes a custom. Hence it would be nonsense to say: just once in the history of the world someone followed a rule (or a signpost; played a game, uttered a sentence, or understood one; and so on).” (RFM 1978: VI, 21)

The question at this point is what we understand by ‘regular behaviour’; something we need to presuppose in order to say that something is ‘conforming to a rule’:

Then am I explaining what “order” and “rule” mean in terms of “regularity”? – How do I explain the meaning of “regular”, “uniform”, “same” to anyone? [...] [I]f a person has not yet got the *concepts*, I’ll teach him to use the words by means of *examples* and by *exercises*. – [...] [...] For example, I’ll teach him to continue an ornamental pattern ‘uniformly’ when told to do so. – And also to continue progressions. That is, for example, when given: . . . . . to go on: . . . . . (PI 2009: 208)

Regularity (or repetition) is not just a manifestation of an underlying rule but pragmatically constitutes the rule. This is also equivalent to saying that the rule becomes existent through its manifestations. Alternatively, a rule emerges as the (observed) fact that there is a repeated regularity of its applications. Beyond these manifestations there is no underlying and general mechanism determining those manifestations.<sup>11</sup> However, what does it mean that a regularity is manifested and observed? The manifestation of a regularity (shown, for instance, by the gesture expressing ‘and so on’) is based on the shared intuition that something is repeated. That is, that ‘the same thing’ is realized: “If an intuition is necessary for continuing the series 1 2 3 4 ..., then also for continuing the series 2 2 2 2 ...” (PI 2009: 214), and: “But isn’t at least the same *the same*? For identity we seem to have an infallible paradigm: namely, in the identity of a thing with itself.” (PI 2009: 215) Identity would seem to play an essential role in our understanding of the application of a rule: “The use of the word ‘rule’ and the use of the word ‘same’ are interwoven.” (PI 2009: 225) However, as we know, Wittgenstein is strongly reluctant to attribute a foundational role to the idea of the ‘same thing’ (identically) repeating itself, which he rather considers an effect of our imagination:

“A thing is identical with itself.” – There is no finer example of a useless sentence, which nevertheless is connected with a certain play of the imagination. (PI 2009: 216)

For Wittgenstein, neither repetition nor regularity presuppose identity. On the contrary, the opposite applies: the fact that something is recognised and stipulated as a repetition justifies the possibility of saying that the same has happened. Thus, what

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<sup>11</sup> We may find a similar stance in Wittgenstein’s criticism of Freudian unconscious mechanisms that manifest in repeated behaviour: “The attractiveness of the suggestion, for instance, that all anxiety is a repetition of the anxiety of the birth trauma, is just the attractiveness of a mythology.” (LA 1966: 51)

comes first is the agreement among subjects to be faced with a regularity; the collective consensus that a rule has been applied (and thus repeated):

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?” – What is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life. (PI 2009: 241)

Mere regularity is not yet a sufficient condition for the emergence of a rule; in the human realm there must be more than pure regularity or uniformity, since both can also be recognized in nature. Understanding must be involved (see, for example, Ms 165: 68, 70, 72). Repetition is the product of a collective and reciprocal practice and is intersubjectively stated and accepted. This is what Wittgenstein means when he says that the “agreement [...] in form of life” (PI 2009: 241) upon which language is based “is not only agreement in definitions but also [...] agreement in judgments [...]. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so. – It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement.” (PI 2009: 242) Stating and judging that an agreement is taking place—that a rule is effectively followed and thus repeated—consequently has a normative character; it is not just a matter of descriptive observation.

Each time we acknowledge that a rule has been followed, the rule’s existence has been strengthened. In other words, the rule is a practice that is established every time and consolidated through its applications. The application of a rule cannot each time be an identical ‘same’ since it always happens in different and changing contexts: it is the collective agreement that a rule has been repeated that re-actualises the rule each time in the new context of use. One might go so far as to say that every time a rule is acknowledged as having been applied, the nature of the rule itself is retroactively redetermined. Each repeated application of a rule (that is, the intersubjective acknowledgment that the rule has been followed) might resignify our understanding of the rule itself.<sup>12</sup>

## 7 Conclusion: “For a bustle comes about only through constant repetition”

It is not regularity (nor identity) that gives us the impression that repetition has occurred, but rather the practical and intersubjectively established agreement that something has been repeated. No abstract concepts can guarantee that some-

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<sup>12</sup> Puhl (2004) even sees in this retroactive mechanism an analogy with the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*, the a posteriori resignification of an event or its mnemonic trace.

thing identically repeats itself. A consequence of this is the fact that the collective recognition of repetition occurs in circumstances that are varying, never identical, and could contain a certain amount of instability. The varied repetitions in rule application create a unity in diversity that does not sacrifice diversity to unity but allows the rule to continue by changing the unity in each case.

In this regard, in one of his last annotations collected in *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Wittgenstein defines the background of human actions as follows:

We judge an action according to its background within human life, and this background is not monochrome, but we might picture it as a very complicated filigree pattern [*sehr kompliziertes filigranes Muster*] [...].

The background is the bustle [*Getriebe*] of life. And our concept points to something within *this* bustle.

[...] For a bustle comes about only through constant repetition [*Denn nur durch ständige Wiederholung ergibt sich ein Getriebe*]. And there is no definite starting point for 'constant repetition'. (RPP 1980b: 624–626)

Some interpretations translate the term *Getriebe* as 'mechanical gear' (a machine component), but in doing so, they exclude the most important definition, which is closer to the original meaning: that of a swirling and mixed variety of activities. This specific meaning becomes clear by reading the few lines below, where Wittgenstein stresses the indeterminacy and variability of such mechanism: "Variability itself is a characteristic of behaviour without which behaviour would be to us as something completely different." (RPP 1980b: 627) That is, even when a behaviour is repeated it is never replicated in the same way. Moreover, he adds:

How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together [*durcheinanderwimmeln*]. Not what *one* man is doing *now*, but the whole hurly-burly [*Gewimmel*], is the background against which we see an action, and it determines our judgment, our concepts, and our reactions. (RPP 1980b: 629; see also Z 1981: 567)

The image of the teeming and mixed web of human actions is opposed to the idea of the mechanical and never-changing movement of a gear. Variability in repetition is an essential component of the constitution of meaning.

In the multiplicity of linguistic practices and uses, not only are rules applied each time in varying and multiple situations, but they can also undergo twists and changes. However, slippages of meaning and mutations do not lead to Mauthner's sceptical conclusions, according to which the instability of human experience dooms the possibility for language to convey objective meaning, turning it into a

source of illusion. For Wittgenstein, the flow becomes an element in which language itself comes to life (cf. Stern 1995: 186):

Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning. (Z 1981: 173; cf. RPP 1980a: 240.)

Conversation flows on, the application and interpretation of words, and only in its course do words have their meaning. (Z 1981: 135)

As a short closing remark concerning this point, one could bear in mind the affinity that has been remarked in the critical literature between Wittgenstein's thinking about repetition and Derrida's observations around the "iterability" of linguistic signs. For Derrida, "iterability" is "at once the condition and the limit" of language use (Derrida 1988: 107). The very nature of any sign is its possibility to be iterated, that is, to be used in different contexts and times by different subjects. However, the possibility of iteration includes the possibility of deviation from the intended meaning of linguistic expressions.<sup>13</sup> Derrida also rejects a sceptical interpretation of his philosophical suggestions (which would make them similar to the ideas of Fritz Mauthner), since the alterity and differences in meaning determined by repetition are, at the same time, the very essence of how signs and language work. However, as is well known, his theoretical contribution focuses on the deconstructive implications of these ideas for traditional philosophical and metaphysical assumptions. The alterity inherent in iteration can make language 'tremble', questioning its foundations and presuppositions (Derrida 1972: 22).

In contrast, for Wittgenstein, there are no metaphysical concepts to be critically questioned; rather, philosophical conundrums have to be dissolved. Repetition guarantees stability, even if at the same time it might contribute to an unevenness:

And this can be expressed as follows: I use the name "N" without a *fixed* meaning. (But that impairs its use as little as the use of a table is impaired by the fact that it stands on four legs instead of three and so sometimes wobbles [*wackelt*].) (PI 2009: 79).

Wittgenstein uses here a quite fitting analogy: while a three-legged table does not wobble, adding the number of legs ('repeating,' so to speak, the supporting element) lowers the risk of the table flipping over, but at the same time also increases

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<sup>13</sup> "At the very moment [...] when someone would like to say or to write, 'On the twentieth ... etc.,' the very factor that will permit the mark (be it psychic, oral, graphic) to function beyond this moment – namely the possibility of its being repeated another time – breaches, divides, expropriates the 'ideal' plenitude or self-presence of intention, of meaning (to say) and, a fortiori, of all adequation between meaning and saying. Iterability alters, contaminating parasitically what it identifies and enables to repeat 'itself'" (Derrida 1988: 61–62).

the possibility of wobbling, since the legs may not be well-aligned with each other. “Where Derrida insists that language trembles, Wittgenstein insists that it wobbles” (Bearn 1995: 20). Whatever kind of uneven movement one might want to focus on: trembling, wobbling, or bustling, for Wittgenstein, this *Getriebe* is given ‘only from constant repetition’—without origin and with ‘no definite starting point’—by which rules, habits, and language emerge and on which they are ultimately grounded.

In summary: a) Repetition, in connection to Wittgenstein’s remarks on rule-following, does not presuppose identity, nor does it need rules of repetition or any underlying abstract principle, but it arises from human practices (it is in the collective practice that repetition is established); b) human praxis is not akin to a rigid mechanism but to an ever-moving ‘bustle’ (*Getriebe*), and therefore it includes a potential openness to variation as its essential component; and c) the Heraclitean flow of this bustle denies absolute stability and is always open to displacement, which is nevertheless the very process by which meaning emerges in praxis.

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