

**Pedagogical influence in Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations:  
The "Following a teacher" argument**

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In PI §186 Wittgenstein asks<sup>1</sup>: "how is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular stage" (referring to the application of the rule meant by the order "+2"). The interlocuter then proposes: "the right step is the one that accords with the order - as it was *meant*". But - Wittgenstein emphasizes - if that is the case, it could not be in the sense that the person who gave the order should have actually meant an infinite set of correct responses, for each particular possible case. So, perhaps- the interlocuter suggests - the pupil should act in *every* particular case in a way that *follows* [folgen] the expression of the rule. To this Wittgenstein replies: "But that is just what is in question: what, at any stage does *follow* from that sentence".

The following of a rule [Regel folgen] requires that each particular action, responding to each particular case – although not covered during the teaching scenario of the rule – will follow from the expression of the rule. Two senses of the notion of *following* interplay here. We can call them following as *activity* (when following is attributed to the person that follows the rule), and following as a *logical relation* (when attributed to a particular act of the follower, in relation to the rule).

When the rule is applied to cases that *are* covered by teaching, the kind of following required from the pupil is radically different than when the application is on newly encountered cases. In the former, the action required by the pupil is that of copying or repetition of a particular action of the teacher, not necessarily with understanding. Though in terms of the logical relation, the act of the pupil indeed follows the rule, the activity of the pupil is that of copying or repetition, and he can hardly be described as following a rule<sup>2</sup>.

In case of the latter, i.e., applying the rule on new cases, the pupil is no longer supposed to repeat an action of the teacher but to do something not yet done by the teacher. This original action we usually see as an indication for *understanding* of the rule. In fact, his being able to apply the rule independently of the teaching is the criterion for understanding the rule. See PI §145-146: "And now at some point he continues the series independently... the effect of any further *explanation* depends on his *reaction* [...] Now, however, let us suppose that after some efforts on the teacher's part he continues the series correctly...". Wittgenstein then rejects the idea that understanding is external to the continuation of the series or that it is "a state which is the *source* of the correct use" and insists on the application of the rule on new cases being a criterion for understanding (or "getting" or "mastering" the system) rather than its outcome.

This *prima facie* gap between mere repetition or copying and application of the rule on new cases is what underlies the paradox of PI §201, widely discussed among commentators: "No course of action could be determined by the rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule". As long as the reaction to the rule expression consists of repetition of the action of the teacher, the reaction of the pupil can safely be described as rule-following (in the sense of *logical relation*) since the original reaction of the teacher in each

case guarantees its correctness. The only risk lurking here is that of the pupil committing an error in the copying itself<sup>3</sup>. But when there is nothing to repeat or copy, that is, when the pupil needs to react to the rule *without* being able to appeal to an example provided by the teacher – of which he could have created a copy, had it been present – there is no way to achieve the determinacy which is prerequisite for regarding the act one of rule-following and the paradox emerges. Deciding between two possible applications (of the rule, in a given case) could be achieved by way of appealing to the teacher’s reaction, but when this is not available – there is no way to decide which application is correct, without having to interpret the rule, and the very point of the paradox of §201 is to show that the conception of rule following as interpretation of the rule cannot yield a description of following that will maintain the identity of the rule followed throughout all cases – including future cases, not covered (and therefore not repeated) during teaching.

We are tempted to solve or avoid the paradox of §201 by appealing to what Wittgenstein calls a mythological description of the use of the rule (§221). According to this mythological description, it is as if the rule generates “rails invisibly laid to infinity” (§218) which symbolizes the fact the “all the steps are really already taken” (§219), i.e. given in advance by the rule expression, and hence, to follow a rule is not about choice but rather done blindly: the “lines along which [the rule] is to be followed through [Befolgen]” are traced by the rule. The picture of rule that underlies this myth is of the rule as a guide, a human agent *telling* us what do whenever encountered with a new case: “the line intimates to me the way I am to go” (§222), or “... the nod [Wink] (the whisper [Einflüsterung]) of the rule” (§223). A rule that “intimates” the way is a rule that is no longer expressed as a rule but is already applied to a specific case. It is omnipresent, in any given case. It is, in this respect, a like teacher.

Trying to bring the word *following* “back from [its] metaphysical to [its] everyday use” (§116) would then mean to depict an everyday context in which following has its place. Such a context, so I claim, is that of teaching, in the sense of an actual encounter between a pupil and a teacher. The distinction between cases covered by teaching and those not covered by teaching which constitutes the §201 paradox becomes then the distinction between applying the rule in the presence of the teacher and applying it when he is no longer present<sup>4</sup>.

Wittgenstein constantly refers to teaching or “scenes of instruction” (in Cavell’s terms) throughout the PI and in other writings from his late period. The Blue Book famously opens with the introduction of the pedagogical context as the methodically adequate context for philosophical investigation: to know what meaning is, we should examine explanations of specific words’ meanings. Bringing down the question *what is meaning* to earth is to rephrase it as a question about how we teach the meanings of specific words. This methodological shift consists of several elements:

(1) Instead of meaning as an entity, we speak of meaning as a constituent of a process (this is somehow close to the context principle). The language game in which is the original home of the concept *meaning* is that of teaching because in teaching (or explaining) meaning is exchanged, handed over from the teacher to the pupil.

(2) By speaking of explanations of meaning, rather than of meaning, the context transforms from logical to pedagogical; from abstract to concrete. Its concreteness is social in the sense that there must be at least two people involved in explaining. This is the argument against private language in a nutshell. Language is essentially public not because it is means for communication but rather because it is taught and learnt).

(3) Consequently, the context of teaching is particular in the sense that for explanation presupposes a particular teacher giving an explanation to particular pupil<sup>5</sup>.

Similar to Wittgenstein's claims about meaning in the opening remarks of the BLB, is his claim in PI §208 in relation to the notion of rule [Regel], or more specifically, regularity [Regelmäßigkeit]. The case of regularity serves not as mere application of the methodological principle of transforming a question about meaning into a question about the *teaching* or *explanation* of meaning (the meaning of "regularity" in this case), but is in fact the *justification* for the very methodological appeal to teaching: it is because the bringing down to earth of the notion of rule following calls for the teaching context, that we need to appeal to that context whenever we try to elaborate meaning, as meanings presuppose regularity. The understanding of a word's meaning depends on the capacity to apply a rule into new cases (or becoming independent of teaching, in the sense of PI §145), which – brought down to earth – is following a teacher.

### Following a teacher

Bringing the notion of following from its metaphysical use to its ordinary one yields a picture of following a teacher. The paradox of rule following then becomes the question of how a pupil who seems to be responding well to the teacher's instructions ("... the pupil now writes the series 0 to 9 to our satisfaction..." (PI §145)) can get along without the presence of the teacher or after the teacher is already gone and teaching is over.

There are two moments in following a teacher, then. One is when the pupil repeats the teacher, during actual teaching. This moment is described in PI §208 thus:

I do it he does it after me [Ich machs ihm vor, er macht es mir nach]<sup>6</sup> and I influence him by expressions of agreement, rejection, expectation, encouragement. I let him go his way, or hold him back, and so on.

The teacher would then point beyond the context of teaching using expressions such as "and so on" and "go on like this", but eventually the second moment of teaching will come, whereby the teacher is no longer present<sup>7</sup>. This moment is where we are faced with the question Wittgenstein raises in §186: what follows from the rule expression. The interlocuter expresses the temptation to overcome the gap between teaching and independent application of the rule by way of *adding* something to the description of teaching so that the actual encounter between the teacher and pupil (which is limited by nature) will encompass *all* cases and not just the ones actually cited: "But then doesn't our understanding reach beyond all the examples?" (§209). To this Wittgenstein replies with a question: "Have I got more than I give in the explanation?" (§209) and continues: "Every explanation I can give myself I give to him too" (§210). This answer I take not just as another instance of Wittgenstein showing the interlocuter how there is nothing more than what is already part of the actual experience of teaching that is needed for understanding of the rule in a way that will be applicable for new cases, but as positively stressing that in this moment of teaching, it is *the teacher* - and not just the rule expression and the examples given – who is present. To give the pupil every explanation I can give myself means not to spare anything from him that I allow myself, not to hold back anything, or make myself – my whole self - available for him. In making myself available as a person lies the solution to the so-called paradox. It is not that the teacher should add anything beyond teaching (that would satisfy the fantasy of guaranteeing the transition from teaching to independence, from copying or repetition to new applications of the rule) but rather, by mere teaching there is already more than what the interlocuter takes as the limited set of finite cases used as examples for the rule. To give examples one needs to be a teacher, a person, and thus the bringing down to earth of the picture of rule following to that

of teacher following helps us see that nothing is missing from the teaching context, as long as we realize that it involves more than the presentation of cases.

There are two different ideas that are expressed here. First, the applicability of the rule to future cases does not mean that during teaching, something should happen beyond mere copying [Nachmachen]. Second, the integrity and effectivity of teaching lies in the teacher's making *himself* available as a model for the student to follow. The response of Wittgenstein does not only say that there are no available explanations apart from gestures and utterances like "and so on" but also that the teacher makes, so to speak, *all of what he has* for himself, available for the pupil. He lends himself as a whole person to the act of teaching.

### A note on Kant

The notion of teaching as making the teacher's person available for others to follow brings forward a moment in Kant's discussion of *following* in the third critique. Kant distinguishes between three types of following of the work of art, the product of genius, or three types of influence of the genius:

- (1) The work of art can be the object of aping [Nacheffung]. Following is here mere mechanical copying [Nachmachung] of an object.
- (2) The example set by the work of art can give rise to a school, so that a follower of the work methodically imitates it according to rules; Following in this sense is imitation [Nachahmung].
- (3) When the work of the genius serves as an example, not to be imitated [Nachahmung] but followed [Nachfolgen] by another genius, it "arouses" [aufgewecken] the follower "to sense of his own originality"<sup>8</sup>

The drama of rule-following might seem to be lying in the transition from Nachmachung to Nachahmung, namely in the transition from mere repetition of the act of the teacher to imitation of the teacher's example, by way of applying the same rule exemplified by the teacher, on a new case. My claim though is that the transition from rule following to teacher-following, as called for by Wittgenstein's methodology, entails that the transition in question is more accurately describable in terms of the transition from Nachmachung to *Nachfolgen*.

If following a rule is following a teacher, then to become independent of the teaching, as Wittgenstein requires in §145, means not just to apply the rule on new cases (Nachmachung) but also to become independent of the teacher, while still remaining faithful to his teaching; being influenced by him, while acting as an independent person, capable of his own original actions.

Someone who is convinced that it is the rule that binds his actions – as if whispering the correct answer to him in every case – does not understand what a rule is, what regularity is, and therefore cannot be said to be following a rule. Such a person will, for example, be easily tricked into funny errors, similar to those of a mechanical imitator. The realization that it is not the rule that tells us what to do but the person who is using the rule during teaching is prerequisite to the understanding of *what a rule is*, and therefore to the understanding of *a rule*.

Kant's description of genial succession in terms of following [Nachfolgen] is a solution to what may seem like a paradox or at least a tension internal to the notion of work of art as the product of genius: the requirement for the work to be exemplary seems to contradict the requirement for it to be original. For the work of, say, genius A to be exemplary it must be

followed by others. As long as following is limited to copying [Nachmachung] or imitation [Nachahmung] the work of the successor may be demonstrating the exemplarity of the work of A, but does not exhibit originality in itself. It would be an application of the very same rule exemplified by A. Now, if the work of genius B *is* original, it might no longer be following the example set by A, since to follow (in the sense of Nachmachung or Nachahmung) is either to repeat A or to produce another instance of the rule exemplified by A. For the work of B to be both original *and* the result of following the example set by A, there must be another mode of following that does not involve imitation or repetition.

Kant's notion of following as reconciliation between the exemplarity (of the teacher) and the originality (of the pupil) is akin to Wittgenstein's PI §209-210 idea of teaching as making oneself available as a whole for others.

By following the teacher's example in the sense of Nachfolgen, the pupil manages to be original and at the same time learn something from the teacher and thus enable his exemplarity. What is learnt is not content but rather the form of exemplarity. It is the teacher position that is being inherited thus. The pupil does not learn *from the example* set by the teacher but rather learns that *one can set an example*, which means, becomes a teacher himself. Moreover, he learns that *one can be original*, as the paradigm of originality is the singularity of a person – never reproducible nor capable of being fully and genuinely copied. Following a teacher, following a person, hence, means to *become* a person – capable of setting an example for others, by way of making himself available as a whole, etc. This resonates Cavell's idea that to master a language is to become entitled to speak for others.

#### “die folgereichsten der ideen”

Shifting from rule following to following of a person – the challenge becomes to account for the following as a continuous state, that goes on beyond the actual encounter with the teacher; for the continuous influence of the teacher while enabling and the independence of the pupil. Since the following of a teacher is, as I claimed, essentially a singular encounter, there is no *science* for the analysis of following, but rather its study is the study of the encounter. This comes close to the conception of biography as the context for the elaboration of teaching and hence of regularity and of meaning. Biography, not in an empirical/psychological sense but in a logical sense, is the context of human life that allows making oneself available as a whole (and not as mere channel providing examples) to exhibit itself. It is therefore no less than the study of human lives – in their singularity – that is the method for studying teaching and regularity and meaning in general. The introduction of biography as a method of philosophy can be further seen as derived from Wittgenstein's PI conception of language as a whole, being equivalent to human life as a whole, guaranteeing understanding, as it is expressed, e.g., in §241 (“It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life”), in §19 (“to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life”) and in §199 (“To understand a sentence means to understand a language”).

Another way to express the idea of the transition from rule following to teacher following is to speak of understanding *a person* rather than understanding *what he says*. Wittgenstein famously alludes to such understanding in the TLP where he writes: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands **me** eventually recognizes them as nonsensical...” (§6.54) [my emphasis].

In the preface to the PI Wittgenstein mentions two people by name: He thanks Ramsey for criticizing his ideas, thus helping him realize his mistakes, and “even more”, to economist Piero Sraffa, for providing “stimulus [Ansporn] for the most consequential [folgereichsten] ideas” of the book. I take the latter as a model for teaching in the sense I am aiming at. Sraffa’s influence is put here in terms of stimulus that yields ideas, which echoes Kant’s talk of one genius’s work arousing [aufgeweckt] another’s sense of originality.

Sraffa’s influence on Wittgenstein is mostly famous for the anecdote which Norman Malcolm tells (as it was told to him by Wittgenstein) about how a gesture made by Sraffa, followed by the comment “what is the logical form of *that*”? produced in him “the feeling that there was an absurdity” in the notion of logical form and “broke the hold on him” of the conception of propositions as pictures<sup>9</sup>.

A criticism providing stimulus for ideas, a work arousing one to a sense of his own originality, and a comment producing in another a feeling concerning the falsity of a notion and further breaking the hold on him of a certain conception – these are all variations on influence, or teaching which we could call *giving a hint*. In a conversation with O.K Bouwsma in 1949, Wittgenstein speaks of borrowing hints as a mode learning and of giving hints as a mode of teaching. The success of teaching as hint-giving relies on the will of the person who receives the hint. He must be “set to follow the hint”. And the result of receiving a hint is described as stimulation: “it started things” and as something that so to speak merges into the person who receives them rather than, say, *grasped*, by him: “That remark went through him”<sup>10</sup>.

The giving of a hint is a method of teaching that can hardly be separated from the context of its occurrence in the lives of the receiver and giver. The literary form adequate for describing teaching by way of hint giving seems to be that of the anecdote (as Malcolm calls the Sraffa story) or trifle (as Bouwsma quotes Wittgenstein, when referring to a hint he borrowed from a play he saw on stage once)<sup>11</sup>.

Departing from Wittgenstein’s remark about Sraffa, “a teacher [Lehrer] in this university”, the reading of Wittgenstein’s correspondence with Sraffa reveals the details of a picture of teaching as hint giving, which is fruitful to the discussion on teacher-following in the PI.

In a letter from 1934 Wittgenstein describes “what he learnt” from Sraffa as dependent not upon what Sraffa could teach him but rather upon “what [...] can be assimilated” by him<sup>12</sup>. Typically for a hint, for the teaching to go through, the receiver needs to actively accept it. The mode of teaching described in Wittgenstein’s letters is that of conversation (similar maybe to the conversation between the interlocutors in the PI itself). For the teaching to succeed, the two need to share a life, as is, e.g. exemplified by Wittgenstein comparing Sraffa’s shortcomings as an interlocuter to a guest not feeling comfortable in a friend’s humble house when he visits him.

In a letter from 1935 Wittgenstein speaks of another aspect of Sraffa’s influence: he is like a layman commenting to a painter on a problem in a portrait. The specific element commented upon is wrongly identified and therefore irrelevant but the very fact that there is a problem in the portrait is true and important. Teaching here has the form of triggering, or stimulation. Like we can expect from a hint, it prompts or stimulates the other for action rather than tells him what to do.

Throughout the letters comes about another characteristic of this teaching. In Wittgenstein’s eyes, both interlocutors are equally wise. They are friends<sup>13</sup>. The tie of friendship (rather than, say, that of colleagues or professional peers) is one of three forms of love, according to

Aristotle<sup>14</sup>. *Philia* is distinguished from *Eros* on the one hand, and from *Agape* on the other. *Eros* is characterized by an internal asymmetry between the position of the lover and that of the beloved. *Agape* is characterized by anonymity or lack of singularity of the beloved and therefore was taken by Augustine to be the core of Christian love of neighbor. *Philia* on the other hand is the love of equals whereby each of the singularly related parties are equal in their virtue and each wills the good of the other. Love seems to be the correct form of the preservation of the teacher's influence after the actual encounter; the form of *being a follower* while no longer *repeating* the actions of the teacher, or of the continuous adherence of one person to another, without jeopardizing the individuality of the pupil.

As of 1941 there seems to be a falling out between the two, which is attributed by Wittgenstein not to anything that has to do with the actual teaching (content or form of their conversation) but rather to changes in Sraffa's personality as a whole<sup>15</sup>. He has become, according to Wittgenstein, "soft" and less of a truth seeker (later in 1947 he is described by Wittgenstein in even harsher terms as inhuman, rude, someone who lost his manners and who is stiff and unfriendly<sup>16</sup>). In 1945, the year of the PI preface, he writes that the way the two developed over the last recent years makes it impossible for them to make a profitable pleasant conversation anymore<sup>17</sup>.

In 1949 he writes, in a letter that seems to be summarizing and in fact closing their friendship, that for two people to understand each other "one has to think *not* of the few occasions on which they meet, but of the differences of their *whole lives*..."<sup>18</sup>.

This observation reflects again the idea that following a teacher requires the extension of teaching relations beyond the actual meeting with the teacher, into newly encountered cases where the teacher is not present. Moreover, the very possibility of understanding is presented here as dependent upon agreement between the *whole* lives of two people rather than on accordance with this or that rule. This is the ultimate moment in the transformation of rule following into teacher following. The life of the follower agrees with that of the teacher (hence the lack of such agreement yields a crisis of teaching which is equivalent to a crisis of understanding). The insight that understanding depends on a whole life expressed here is yet another manifestation of the context of meaningfulness being *a form of life*, discussed above (See again PI §19, §199 and §241).

We can return now to the wording of the acknowledgement to Sraffa in the PI preface. Sraffa is thanked for providing "stimulus [Ansporn] for the most *consequential* [folgereichsten] ideas" of the book. Can we understand a thought's being *consequential* [folgereich] (or, literally, *apt for following*) along the lines of Kant's notion of genial succession, whereby the measure of genius is the degree in which one's work can be taken as an example for others to (originally) follow? Sraffa's teaching is claimed here to have endowed Wittgenstein's work with the capacity to serve as an example, i.e. to become teaching. Wittgenstein wished after all for his writing to "stimulate [Anregen<sup>19</sup>] someone to thoughts of his own".

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<sup>1</sup> I will use throughout the common abbreviations for Wittgenstein’s works: *PI* (Philosophical Investigations), *TLP* (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus), *BLB* (The Blue Book).

Original German terms are indicated when necessary between brackets following their English translations.

<sup>2</sup> Think of the teacher writing down ordering “add 2”, and writing down the series 1866, 1868, 1870, encouraging the pupil to do the same. When writing down the number 1870 the pupil is best described as imitating the teacher rather than following the rule expressed by “add 2”, though the act of writing down the number 1870 *can* be described as (logically) following from the rule expressed by the order. Writing down 1872, on the other hand, *can* be regarded as following-as-activity.

<sup>3</sup> This sort of mechanic copying which replicates also the inessential or arbitrary aspects of the original is referred to by Kant in the third critique as *aping* [*Nacheffung*] and I will relate to it later in the section dedicated to Kant.

<sup>4</sup> It could be argued, and rightly so, that even during teaching, beside cases where the pupil merely repeats or copies the teacher’s reaction, there are also cases where he genuinely produces a new response. Moreover, there is no sharp boundary between mere repetition and application of the rule on newly encountered cases during teaching. My claim, though, does not rest on an empirical distinction between the presence and absence of a teacher but rather on the logical distinction between imitation and originality which rests upon the difference between there cases where the criterion for the correctness of the response is its comparison with another particular case, i.e. paradigmatically, teacher’s response, and cases where the criterion for such correctness is its comparison with the rule expression.

<sup>5</sup> Explanation is different in this respect from definition, for example. The latter does not require that someone *will define* the definiendum for someone else. A can be the definition of B regardless of whether someone is using A to define B, while for A to be an explanation of B someone needs to (potentially, not necessarily actually) use A so as to explain B to another.

<sup>6</sup> A more accurate translation of the German sentence *Ich machs ihm vor, er macht es mir nach* would perhaps be *I show him, he repeats after me*. See my discussion of Kant’s notion of following (*Nachmachung*, *Nachahmung* and *Nachfolgen*) below.

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>8</sup> Kant, §49, pp. 146-147

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Bouwsma, pp. 46-48.

<sup>11</sup> The scholarly literature surrounding Wittgenstein is scattered with such biographical anecdotes, documenting moments of hint giving and hint borrowing, taken from biographical accounts of Wittgenstein and his contemporaries, memoirs, letters, etc. These reports often act *in themselves* as hints when used by commentators to shed light on various aspects of Wittgenstein’s thought. My reading of Wittgenstein’s letters to Sraffa, that

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follows, is intended as an application of what I take to be a philosophical method introduced by late Wittgenstein, whereby the realm of biography and the literary form of the biographical anecdote that expresses it are where questions concerning meaning and understanding should be addressed.

<sup>12</sup> McGuinness, §169, p. 222.

<sup>13</sup> Another instance of teaching as hint giving, which stresses the friendship between the two parties engaged in the teaching, is when Wittgenstein writes in the preface to the TLP: “I will only mention that I am indebted [...] to the writings of my friend Mr. Bertrand Russell for much of the stimulation [Anregung] of my thoughts”.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book 8.

<sup>15</sup> McGuinness, §289. p. 338

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, §372. p. 416

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, §341. p. 389

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, §410. p. 450

<sup>19</sup> Note again the mention of Russell in the TLP preface, where his contribution is put in terms of *stimulation* [Anregung].