

WITTGENSTEIN ON DESCRIPTION

By: HEATHER J. GERT

Gert, Heather J. "Wittgenstein on Description," *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 88, issue 3, Dec. 1997, 221-243.

Made available courtesy of Springer Verlag: <http://www.springer.com/philosophy/journal/11098>

The original publication is available at www.springerlink.com

*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Those familiar with Wittgenstein's later writings know that Wittgenstein believed that description was the proper pursuit of philosophy. Despite the fact that description is so clearly fundamental to Wittgenstein's philosophical thought, little attempt has been made to understand exactly what he was saying about descriptions. Where something is said, it is either that Wittgenstein thought that the proper job of philosophy was to describe language-games or uses of individual terms. Sometimes an attempt is made to explain what a language-game is, or which uses of terms should be described, but usually it is assumed that this is more or less self-evident, or that the details do not matter; what is important is that Wittgenstein advocated description over explanation.

Although interpretations tend to leave it at this, Wittgenstein himself repeatedly claims that we call many different kinds of things descriptions and that there is no one proper case of description. Given that Wittgenstein believes that there is such a variety of descriptions, and that he thinks this significant enough to repeat a number of times, it seems that something has been left out of the usual account of Wittgenstein on description. This paper is an attempt to begin to remedy that.

My purpose is to highlight and distinguish between two related suggestions Wittgenstein made regarding description, one general and one more specific. The general suggestion has already been mentioned; it is the job of philosophers to describe. This leaves open questions of what we are to describe, and what form or purpose these descriptions are to have. The more specific suggestion I want to highlight provides one answer to the first of these questions; it is a suggestion about what we are to describe. It is the suggestion that we should describe descriptions. In other words, the first, general, suggestion is that descriptions are what philosophers are supposed to produce, and the second, more specific, suggestion is that descriptions should be a topic of study and description.

The first section of this paper begins with a discussion of Wittgenstein's general claim that it is the job of philosophers to describe rather than explain. This section goes on to present a number of passages in which he asks us to think about what descriptions of various types of things are like: descriptions of attitudes, of faces, of paintings, etc. Section II provides an illustration of the kind of project Wittgenstein has in mind when he asks us to think about and describe descriptions: in it I discuss what we can learn from descriptions of pain. The third and final section examines the sort of mistakes in interpretation that can result from failing to take Wittgenstein's attitude towards describing descriptions into account. Here I focus on mistakes that have been made in interpreting Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following.

I.

Throughout his writings Wittgenstein is not only concerned with specific philosophical problems, but also with the nature of philosophy. His most sustained discussion of the nature and parameters of philosophy is Q8"93 of the Big Typescript.¹ In these and other passages he makes it clear that he believes that philosophical investigations should be investigations of language. The reason for this is that philosophical perplexities arise because of misunderstandings about language. This is not to say that these perplexities are only about language.

In our attempts to offer philosophical explanations we misapply analogies and confuse ourselves with ambiguous terms. The result of this, according to Wittgenstein, is that we make mistakes about the topics of our discussions, and not merely about the language in which we discuss them.

Another sustained discussion of the role of philosophy is found in *Philosophical Investigations*, from approximately § 106–§ 133.² In these later passages Wittgenstein repeatedly expresses the idea that it is not the job of philosophy to explain, but merely to describe. Here is a sampling of what he says:

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. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: in despite of an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. (§ 109)

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. (§ 124)³

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us. (§ 126)

When Wittgenstein talks of description in these passages, he is talking about descriptions of language. This is made explicit in § 109 and § 124, and given the context there is no doubt that he is talking about language in the remainder of the passages between § 106 and § 133. But beyond this there is little in these passages to indicate exactly which aspects of language are to be described. Nor are there passages elsewhere in which Wittgenstein provides a clear explanation of which aspects of language he has in mind. But this does not mean that there is no way to figure out what he thinks philosophers should describe. We can look at what he himself does, and at the specific questions he asks throughout his writings. I will say more about this below.

Unfortunately, the fact that Wittgenstein gives no explicit formulation of his intentions concerning description makes it easy to dismiss his proposal without having a detailed understanding of what that proposal is. For instance, in the preface of *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* Michael Dummett rejects the suggestion that philosophy should be limited to description, although he does not pretend to say anything about the sorts of descriptions Wittgenstein was concerned with:

We all stand ... in the shadow of Wittgenstein ... Some things in his philosophy, however, I cannot see any reason for accepting: and one is the belief that philosophy, as such, must never criticise but only describe.... I could not respect his work as I do if I regarded his arguments and insights as depending on the truth of this belief.⁴

In volume two of *The False Prison* David Pears is similarly insensitive to worries about various types of description, when he considers what Wittgenstein means by the claim that philosophy should describe, not explain.⁵ Pears begins his discussion by asking what kind of explanation Wittgenstein is rejecting, and goes on to ask why Wittgenstein is interested in description. But he says nothing at all about what Wittgenstein means by “description”. This is treated as self-evident.

When some kind of claim is made as to the type of descriptions Wittgenstein had in mind, it is often assumed that he was interested in descriptions of the uses of individual terms.⁶ For instance, summarizing x 125, P. M. S. Hacker says:

If one discovers through questioning that someone is using different and conflicting rules *for one and the same word*, then one brings him to see a source of confusion, and the necessity for a decision. But the decision should be his, not the therapist's.⁷ (my emphasis)

In the section Hacker is interpreting Wittgenstein talks about the rules we use in games and mathematics, and it is clear that he is talking about the rules of language as well. However Wittgenstein does not mention words at all. Nevertheless, Hacker, like many others, assumes that Wittgenstein is saying that the solutions to our philosophical problems lie in describing rules for the use of individual terms. My point is not that Wittgenstein

never talks about the uses of individual terms. In § 43 he says, “For a large class of cases-though not for all-in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”⁸ My point is merely that the fact that he sometimes talks about describing uses of individual terms has led some to talk as if this is what Wittgenstein has in mind whenever he talks of description.

Expanding on the idea of describing the uses of individual terms, some have also mentioned describing the uses of sentences. In both cases the sort of use to be described is often left unspecified; certainly Wittgenstein gives no clear account of the aspects of the use of a word or sentence he believes should be described. Sometimes it is said that what is to be described is their use in a language-game. And sometimes it is said that we should describe language-games themselves.

Wittgenstein does make all of these suggestions at one time or another, but these are not the descriptions he talks about most often. More often he talks about descriptions of various phenomena and other sorts of things, and he is interested in describing these descriptions. Of course I cannot prove that he talks about one type of description more than another without quoting all of the relevant passages, so in the end readers will have to return to the texts to check this out for themselves. In the meantime, here is a sampling of passages, from the Investigations and elsewhere, in which Wittgenstein discusses various descriptions; these are descriptions of phenomena, not descriptions of the use of individual terms, sentences, or language-games. Notice the difference between the types of points he is making here as opposed to the point he was making in the collection of passages quoted earlier:

Think how many different kinds of thing are called ‘description’: description of a body’s position by means of its co-ordinates; description of a facial expression; description of a sensation of touch; of a mood. (§ 24)

What we call ‘descriptions’ are instruments for particular uses.... Thinking of a description as a word-picture of the facts has something misleading about it: one tends to think only of such pictures as hang on our walls: which seem simply to portray how a thing looks, what it is like. (§291)

And now look at all that can be meant by “description of what is seen”. – But this just is what is called description of what is seen. There is not one genuine propercase of such description– the rest being just vague, something which awaits clarification, or which must just be swept aside as rubbish. (p. 200)

The question “What do you see?” gets for answer a variety of kinds of description. – If now someone says “After all, I see the aspect, the organization, just as much as I see shapes and colours” – what is that supposed to mean? That one includes all that in ‘seeing’? Or that here there is the greatest similarity? – And what can I say to the matter?⁹

It is possible to describe a painting by describing events; indeed that’s the way it would be described in almost every instance. “He’s standing there, lost in sorrow, she’s wringing her hands ...” Indeed, if you could not describe it this way you wouldn’t understand it, even if you could describe the distribution of color on its surface in minute detail.¹⁰

What is the description of an ‘attitude’ like?¹¹

None of the descriptions mentioned in these passages are descriptions of the uses of individual terms. In fact, none of these descriptions are descriptions of language at all. They are descriptions of faces, paintings, and things we see, etc. How can Wittgenstein insist that it is the job of philosophy to focus its attention on language, while he writes about descriptions of so many different things? The answer to this question is that all descriptions are in language, and therefore to talk about descriptions, whether or not they are descriptions of language, is to talk about language. And to describe descriptions is to describe language, no matter what those described descriptions describe.

The descriptions Wittgenstein mentions here are not philosophical descriptions – at least insofar as the descriptions philosophers offer are in any way distinct.¹² The descriptions he talks about are everyday descriptions: How do we describe paintings, attitudes, or what we see? In none of these passages is Wittgenstein advocating either that philosophers describe the uses of particular terms, or that we engage in describing the

things to which those terms refer. Rather, he is saying that philosophers should describe the descriptions that people give of the things they talk about.

The following illustrates the difference between descriptions of things and descriptions of descriptions of things: A description of a particular painting might begin, "A young woman is sitting under a tree ...". In contrast, a description of descriptions of paintings might begin, "In a representational painting the event depicted in the painting is described ...". And it is the description of the descriptions of paintings that Wittgenstein asks about. Similarly, in the quotation from *Philosophical Investigations* §24 he does not ask us to describe facial expressions, sensations, or moods, or the use of terms for facial expressions, sensations, or moods. He asks us to compare descriptions of facial expressions, sensations, and moods. And in Zettel §204 he does not ask for a description of an attitude, nor does he ask how "attitude" is used. He asks what a description of an attitude is like. In all of these passages the topics are the descriptions themselves.

Thus, Wittgenstein made two distinct, albeit related, suggestions concerning descriptions. The first and more general of these is that it is the job of philosophers to engage in description of language, and to refrain from explanation. As we have seen, this leaves it open which aspects of language are to be described, and what form those descriptions are to take. The second, and more specific suggestion is illustrated by the passages quoted above; philosophers should investigate descriptions. Taken together, the suggestion is that philosophers should describe descriptions. In the next section I will follow Wittgenstein's advice and see what we can learn from describing descriptions of pain.

II.

Describe a pain you remember, or one you are currently experiencing. In doing this you will probably say something about how severe it is, and where it is located. You might also say something about how it actually affects your behavior (it makes me wince, or limp, or keeps me from concentrating), or what it makes you feel like doing (it makes me feel like crying, or shrieking). You are likely to describe it in terms of the sorts of things you believe would cause similar feelings (stabbing, burning, it feels as if someone is pounding on my head with a hammer). And no doubt there are many other things you might say as well. What would you learn about pain by offering this description? It does not seem that in describing this individual pain you would be making any philosophical observations.

But if we look at your description and take it, along with other descriptions of other pains, as the things to be studied, perhaps we can learn a little more. In doing this we might begin by saying much of what was indicated in the previous paragraph. Descriptions of pains often attribute to them location and relative severity. From looking at these aspects of pain descriptions we learn that pains are located and come in varying degrees of severity.¹³ We also learn that a pain's location is determined by where it is experienced. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by descriptions of what is called "referred pain," as well as by descriptions of phantom pain. A person who has had her leg amputated can legitimately describe a pain as being where her leg should be. The fact that her leg is no longer there gives us no reason to reject her description. The pain is appropriately described as being where it is experienced, and not at the physical location of the damage or nerve stimulation that explains its occurrence. That is, the answer to the question "Where does it hurt?" is almost always immediately obvious to the person in pain, even if the location of the cause of that pain is not, and we treat his sincere description of where that pain is as authoritative.

Looking at pain descriptions we also discover that most often one classifies pains according to the type of cause one would expect to produce a pain like the one one is feeling.¹⁴ Thus, a burning pain is a pain that feels like the pain that is commonly caused by burning, a sharp pain is like the pain that is often caused by something sharp, etc. (There is at least one exception to this. To describe a pain as an ache plays the same kind of role as describing it as sharp or burning, but it does not involve indicating a typical external cause of a kind of pain.) This is not to say that a particular pain will be categorized on the basis of its actual cause. There is a difference between categorizing pains on the basis of actual causes, and categorizing them on the basis of what they feel like. We normally do the latter, not the former; ice can cause a burning pain.

There are other things we can learn about pain by paying attention to how we describe it, as well. For instance, we can learn something about the privacy of pain. One might believe that it is merely a contingent fact that we do not feel one another's pains.¹⁵ And there is a related fact about our relation to one another's pains which is contingent; the fact that, in the actual world, the physical pain of one person does not cause physical pain in another. But we must be careful not to confuse this fact with the fact that pain is private. It is possible to imagine a world in which a person can experience physical pain as the result of touching a painful spot on another person's skin. But that would not be a world in which pain is public.

To see this, think about how we would deal with descriptions of pain if we suddenly found that painful experiences resulted from touching other people's wounds. Consider what our reaction would be if Henry's sincere description of the pain he comes to know about by touching Helen's sunburnt skin differs significantly from Helen's sincere description of the pain she is experiencing. She says it is mild, he says it is terrible; she says that it is burning, he says that it is sharp; etc. Would we wonder which of them was mistaken? Would we automatically favor one description over another? (On the one hand, maybe we should favor Helen's description. After all, it is her pain. On the other hand, perhaps Henry's external position is the better one from which to get an objective view of the pain.) We would accept both descriptions. But if each description is correct, and they are not compatible, then – in our normal way of speaking – they do not describe the same thing. What Helen describes is Helen's, and what Henry describes is Henry's. That this is the way we would deal with these descriptions shows that we regard pain as essentially private.

But how do I know how people would think about what we now call "pain" in such a counterfactual situation? Can't we stipulate a world the inhabitants of which do not accept conflicting descriptions such as those offered by Henry and Helen? We certainly can stipulate this, and in that case these people would be talking about something public; but they would not be talking about what we call "pain". They would not have our concept of pain, or be using our term "pain". Notice that the only change that we are imagining between this newest situation and the one described in the previous paragraph is a difference in which descriptions are accepted. In the first paragraph conflicting descriptions are not accepted, in this case they are. That is a grammatical difference. It is not a change in the way the world is outside of language.

Wittgenstein considers a situation similar to the last one described:

... it would be conceivable that a connection could be established with someone else through which I would feel the same pain (i.e. the same kind of 'pain'), and in the same place, as the other person. But that this is the case would have to be ascertained through both people's expression of pain.

And if this way of getting to know someone else's pain were to have proved its worth, it's conceivable that one would apply it against a person's expression of pain, and thus would mistrust his expression if it contradicted that test.

And now one can also imagine that there are people who follow that method from the outset, and call that "pain" which is ascertained by means of it. In that case their concept 'pain' will be related to ours, but different from it.¹⁶

In other words, Wittgenstein is saying that it is conceivable that beings in other ways like us could have painful knowledge of one another's 'pains'. Moreover, it is conceivable that they find this knowledge so reliable – the wounded person and those who touch his wound almost always agree in their descriptions of the 'pain', other persons' descriptions give as good or better indication of the seriousness of the damage causing the 'pain', etc. – that they are as likely to accept the "observer's" description of a 'pain' as they are to accept the description given by the wounded person.¹⁷

On the way of speaking Wittgenstein imagines the persons he describes say that they feel one another's 'pains'. But on our way of speaking we would say that the world Wittgenstein describes is a world in which one person's physical pain can cause physical pain in another. What is important to see is that there are no facts that will make either way of speaking right and the other wrong. This is not an empirical question. Even if I am

mistaken about what we would say if we suddenly found that it hurt to touch another's wound, the previous paragraphs illustrate that the same empirical facts can support both a person's description of the pain she has as a result of touching someone else's sunburn, as well as her description of the 'pain' of his sunburn. This is not to say that empirical facts are irrelevant; neither description is ever true in our world. It is just to say that the very same facts will support both ways of speaking.

Another way to see that these people would not be talking about pain in the same way we do is to see that they would disagree with us, in other cases, about what sorts of descriptions of pains are acceptable. Obviously, the new public concept we have been talking about is closely related to our concept of pain, but this concept is also more like our concept of warmth than is our actual concept of pain. I can offer a description of how warm I am, and I can also describe the warmth of others' bodies. But I cannot give a firsthand description of pain in other persons' bodies. In contrast, the people we have been imagining describe their own 'pain', and can describe the 'pain' of others. To this extent, therefore, their concept of 'pain' is similar to our concept of warmth. But if this is right then what is to keep them from being in a position to describe the 'pain' of non-sentient objects just as we describe their warmth? Ironically, this point is brought out by Harold Langsam, during the course of an argument by means of which he intends to prove that what is referred to by "pain" in our present language is only contingently private:

The similarities between the imagined cases of touching smooth and warm objects exposes the arbitrariness of the Wittgensteinian denial that in the imagined cases I feel my lover's pain. For there is no more reason to deny that in the imagined situations I can feel my lover's pain than there is to deny that in normal situations I can feel the smoothness and warmth of my lover's skin.¹⁸

But if there really is no more reason to deny that one might feel another's pain than there is to deny that one can feel the smoothness and warmth of her skin, then neither is there any reason to deny that one can feel the pain of inanimate objects. After all, feeling the smoothness and warmth of another person's skin is no different than feeling the smoothness and warmth of an inanimate object. But, of course, we will not accept as legitimate descriptions of an inanimate object's pain. No matter what I feel when I touch a flame, it is inappropriate for me to describe the pain as belonging to the flame.

What Langsam has failed to recognize is that there is a fundamental difference between our concept of pain and our concept of warmth. There are two distinct senses in which a person can feel warmth; an objective sense and a subjective sense. But "pain" only has a subjective sense. In the objective sense of "warm," different persons can feel that the same thing is warm. Both you and I can offer first-hand descriptions the warmth of my coffee. We might even disagree about whether it is very warm or only tepid, and we might settle our dispute by asking others or by measuring the coffee's temperature with a thermometer. In our language there is no use of "pain" that parallels this objective sense of "warm".

But "warm" can also have another sense. A person can experience warmth even though she is not touching anything that is warm. This is the subjective sense, and, as with pain, every person is an authority on whether or not they themselves are experiencing warmth in the subjective sense. Although I can use a thermometer to show that you are mistaken in believing that my coffee is very warm, rather than merely tepid, this has no bearing on the character of your subjective experience. The coffee might feel very warm to you because you were just outside, barehanded, shoveling snow. This is the sort of thing that can affect one's subjective experience of warmth, but the warmth of the coffee is not affected by the fact that you have just come in out of the cold. You are the primary authority in regards to your subjective experience of warmth, in just the same way that you are the primary authority on whether or not you feel pain, and Langsam can no more feel the warmth of his lover's skin in the subjective sense than he can feel her pain.

We can now sum up the suggestion that there could be a world in which pain was public as the suggestion that there could be a world in which "pain" had an objective, as well as a subjective sense. This is true, but because in our world "pain" has no objective sense, that would be a world in which "pain" has a sense that it does not have here.

The factors we have considered in this section illuminate our concept of pain. If we were creating a computer program to deal with descriptions of pain we would want it to search those descriptions for indications of a pain's location, severity and type. We would not want it to look for indications of a pain's color, sound, or weight. We would also want it to take into account who is offering the description: Is it the person in pain, or someone observing him? Thus, by considering specific acceptable (not necessarily true) descriptions of particular pains we discover the parameters of what can sensibly be said about pain. We might say that this gives us an account of the pain language- game. Or we might say that it tells us about the general nature of pain.

Unfortunately, although not false, both of these options can be misleading. The first option, that we have learned something about the pain language-game, is misleading because it sounds as if only language is at issue, as if it doesn't matter what we say, so long as consistent relations between terms are maintained. Recall, however, that Wittgenstein talks of more than language as having a role in a language-game, and he clearly believes that the way the world is constrains how we use language.¹⁹

But the second option is also misleading. It is misleading because it encourages one to think that pains exist in the same way that stones or brains do. For instance, it encourages us to think of the location of a pain as analogous to the location of a stone; as if we might be able to put a stone in the place where the pain is, as if it could take up the same space. But there are important differences between the acceptable descriptions of a stone's location and acceptable descriptions of the location of a pain. For instance, the location of a stone may be other than it appears to be, while this is not true for the location of a pain (though it may be true for the location of its cause). It is also natural to describe a pain as having come back, even though it wasn't anywhere else in the meantime, but a stone certainly cannot come back unless there is somewhere it was while it was away. Perhaps when we say that a pain has returned we only mean that it is a pain of the same type, but to insist on this because that is what we would have to say if a physical object disappeared and an indistinguishable one took its place is to beg the question. At least on the face of it, it is one thing to say that this headache is like the one I had last month (of the same type), and another to say that the very same headache returned when the medication wore off.

All of this makes saying whether or not the term "pain" refers to some thing which is pain quite tricky. The phenomena on the basis of which the truth of our descriptions of pain depend are the same as the phenomena on the basis of which the truth of very different descriptions might depend, as evidenced by our discussion of the people who said they felt one another's pains. Even though our descriptions depend on precisely the same phenomena, what those people described were public phenomena, while what we describe are essentially private. This makes it awfully tempting to do as Wittgenstein does, and reject the idea that "pain" is a referring term, or that pains are objects.

– "And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a nothing." – Not at all. It is not a something but not a nothing either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said. We have only rejected the grammar which tries to force itself on us here. (§304)

Language does not determine how the world is. Something bad would happen if I dropped a brick on my foot, regardless of how it might be described. What sorts of descriptions of the world are appropriate will depend, in part, on the grammar of our language and in part on how the world is. And given the way the world is, some ways of organizing language will be more useful than others; but this does not mean that there is one best way, one best grammar. Wittgenstein's concern is that we get a clear view of the grammar that we actually use, even if there are others we might have used instead.

III.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the failure to appreciate, or perhaps the decision to ignore, the centrality of description for Wittgenstein has influenced discussions on other aspects of his work. For instance, many discussions of the passages on rule following take it for granted that Wittgenstein sought to explain how rules work, or what it is that grounds our use of them, etc. It is assumed that Wittgenstein had hoped to find some

fact-of-the-matter present when a person decides to follow a rule and which unambiguously determines which future actions are or are not in accord with that rule. But if Wittgenstein took his own advice, he should have been talking about descriptions of rules and rule-following rather than about explanations of how rules determine actions, or of what determines whether or not an action is in accord with a given rule.

Kripke's discussion in Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language is an excellent example of a mistaken attempt to see Wittgenstein as looking for an explanation of the way rules determine future actions. Kripke begins the first chapter of his book with a selection from the first paragraph of Investigations §201: "This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule."²⁰ Throughout the rest of his book Kripke writes as if this passage summarizes Wittgenstein's view about a genuine difficulty about rule-following. But if we look at the second paragraph of §201 we see that Kripke's use of part of §201 gives a false impression of Wittgenstein's intention.²¹

It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited by what we call "obeying the rule" and "going against it" in actual cases.

This paragraph speaks of the previous one, the one quoted by Kripke, as exhibiting a misunderstanding: it is a misunderstanding to think that no course of action can be determined by a rule simply because every course of action can be seen as being in accord with that rule. Wittgenstein's implicit suggestion in the second paragraph is that our worries about rule-following would be quieted if we attended to descriptions of the situations in which a person is said to be obeying a rule or going against it. Although it is true that we can describe any action as being in accord with a given rule, in actual practice there is clearly no need to worry about this. Thus, what we should do is look at our actual practice; what sorts of descriptions do we give of a person who is obeying a rule and what sorts of descriptions do we give of one who is going against it? In order to give a full description of rule-following it is not enough to describe a narrowly defined action and a corresponding rule. We need to describe the situations in enough detail to allow us to appreciate all of the relevant factors and the roles they play. That is, our descriptions must take into account the context in which this practice of following a rule occurs.

It is true that the paragraph from which Kripke quotes seems to assume that we need only look at rules and narrowly defined actions in order to know whether or not the actions are determined by the rules. But in this paragraph Wittgenstein is summing up the difficulty that arises from looking at the problem in the wrong way, he is not expressing what he takes to be the correct conclusion about rule-following. Mistaking Wittgenstein's summary of a mistaken view as an account of the view he holds leads Kripke to conclude, in chapter three, that "... Wittgenstein holds, with the skeptic, that there is no fact as to whether I mean plus or quus."²²

Again, Kripke's claim is mistaken. Although Wittgenstein might have said that there is no fact that determines whether I meant plus or quus, he would not have said that there was no fact as to what I meant. This is because in real life we accept that descriptions of rule-following can legitimately include statements about whether or not an action is in accord with the rule as it was meant. If I ask you to show the children a game, and you teach them gaming with dice, my claim that "I didn't mean that sort of game" can be true.²³ This is so even though if you ask me in virtue of what it is true, I have no (there is no) knock-down answer. Nevertheless, if you are reluctant to believe me when I say that that was not what I meant, I can appeal to my membership in the Down with Gambling Club and my well-known thoughts on the impressionability of young children. That is, these are the sorts of facts that you are supposed to take to be relevant, even though my membership in the Down with Gambling Club and my thoughts on the impressionability of young children do not determine what I can mean when I say, "Show the children a game."

When we recognize the role that practice plays in rule-following and in the proper attribution of rule-following we see that specific facts about the origin of an action cannot determine whether or not that action is in accord

with a particular rule. The apparent paradox mentioned in §201 arises only apart from any practice and outside of any context. But practice and context are essential to the question of whether or not a rule is being followed. This is why there can be no private rule-following and no private language.²⁴ Thus, in the following section, §202, Wittgenstein says: “And hence also ‘obeying a rule’ is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.”

A detailed description of descriptions of rule-following behavior, of the actual situations in which we say that someone is “obeying a rule,” would not only illustrate the importance of context and practice, it would also demonstrate that these descriptions involve many recurring themes. For instance, as also indicated above, when a person describes himself or someone else as obeying a rule he generally does not owe any further account of that behavior. We would also find that a person is very often said to be following a rule if her answer matches the answers many others give. (This is not to say that giving the same answer as others is what constitutes following a rule, it is only to say that in such situations one will be described as obeying the rule; further considerations could prompt an alteration of that description.) Descriptions in which one is said to be following a rule will also often include a claim to the effect that the person is continuing to do the same thing, or that he is doing the same thing that others did when they followed the rule. Etc.

On Wittgenstein’s view the problem arises when those such as Kripke try to offer an explanation of rule-following from outside of a rule-following language-game, rather than describing the practices involved in it. As a result of their perspective they ignore our actual descriptions of rule-following or reject some of these types of descriptions because they appear to conflict with others. In contrast, for Wittgenstein the challenge is to see all of these types of description as consistent. These just are the descriptions we give of following a rule. His insistence on maintaining all of our useful types of description leads Wittgenstein to deny that the truth of a description of rule-following is determined in anything like the way that the truth of a description of a physical object is determined. Throughout the Investigations Wittgenstein repeatedly demonstrates that he accepts descriptions of rules without accepting that these descriptions work in the same way when applied to rules as seemingly identical descriptions work when applied to other things.

In passages around §201 Wittgenstein frequently introduces phrases one might use to describe what happens when one follows a rule. In each case his intention is to demonstrate how one might try to assimilate following a rule to other activities on the basis of apparent similarities between descriptions of rule-following and descriptions of other activities. “But,” as Wittgenstein says earlier in the Investigations, “assimilating the descriptions of uses of words in this way cannot make the uses themselves any more like one another. (§ 10) More generally, Wittgenstein warns against assuming that two things are similar just because their descriptions are similar; the similarity between a photograph and the scene it depicts is not nearly as great as the similarity between the description of that photograph and the description of the scene. In much the same way describing both pain and warmth as things that we feel disguises important dissimilarities. Etc. Let us look at some other passages in which Wittgenstein tries to warn us against being misled by the way we describe our experiences with rules.

Philosophical Investigations § 197 begins, “‘It’s as if we could grasp the whole use of a word in a flash.’ – And that is just what we say we do. That is to say: we sometimes describe what we do in these words.” The section continues with a discussion about how this way of describing what happens when we come to understand the use of a term can be misleading; this is not to say that it is false. It is misleading because using the same words to describe coming-to-understand as one uses to describe events which occur very quickly leads one to try to find similarities between understanding “in a flash” and events such as finishing one’s dinner “in a flash,” or even the event of a flash of light. It leads us to believe that everything that is relevant to whether or not a person has understood can occur in a moment; “... we are led to think that the future development must in some way already be present in the act of grasping the use (§ 197)

But if our primary reason for believing that coming-to-understand is an event that occurs in a brief and definite time is that we can describe it using the same words that we use to describe events that occur at a definite moment, then the way to see that it is not really an event of this type is to see that other ways of describing these events are not legitimate as descriptions of coming-to-understand. For instance, typically other events that can be described as happening in a flash nevertheless have a beginning, middle and end, while coming-to-understand in a flash does not. These other events can be interrupted, but coming-to-understand in a flash cannot. Etc.²⁵ Thus, we need to be wary of assuming a similarity between coming-to-understand in a flash and events that occur in a flash. The mere fact that what appears to be one description applies to each does not guarantee that they are similar. Nevertheless, we know what someone means when he says that he came to understand something in a flash, we understand the difference between this and a slow dawning of understanding. Therefore, it is sometimes correct to say that someone understood in a flash, even if to say so can be misleading.

A similar discussion takes place in § 219, where Wittgenstein says,

“All the steps are really already taken” means: I no longer have any choice.... my description only made sense if it was to be understood symbolically. – I should have said: This is how it strikes me.

When I obey a rule, I do not choose.

Here following a rule is being described in the same way as a certain sort of situation, a situation in which the steps I am to take, the places I am to put my feet, are marked out in front of me. Other related descriptions of such situations and of following a rule are similar as well. In both cases it is natural to describe what I am doing by saying that once I have begun, it takes no new decision to continue; although, in both cases, it is also possible to describe what I am doing as requiring a new decision at each step.²⁶ But, again, this similarity between some descriptions of following a rule and some descriptions of following along pre-marked footsteps can be misleading; these similarities between descriptions foster a temptation to assume additional similarities between the things described. If I am walking along a path and describe the situation as one in which “all the steps are really already taken,” I am describing a situation in which each particular step has literally been marked out before I arrived. Because the experience of following a rule can also be described as finding that “all the steps are really already taken” it is tempting to assume that in this case as well each step has been determined ahead of time in more or less the same way that the steps I should walk along were determined on the pre-marked path. But we should not assume this merely on the basis of the similarity of the earlier descriptions. An investigation of the phenomena demonstrate important differences; the mere fact that no physical marks have been made ahead of time, for instance. And we know that the physical steps could have been placed elsewhere, but nothing like this is true with the steps dictated by a rule. Etc.

Or, again, in §222: “‘The line intimates to me the way I am to go.’ – But that is of course only a picture. And if I judged that it intimated this or that as it were irresponsibly, I should not say that I was obeying it like a rule.” If a person intimates to me which way I am to go, I may describe myself as following him even though he continually tells me to do different things, or leads me “irresponsibly.” But it makes no sense to describe myself as following a rule that guides me “irresponsibly.” This is not a permissible or legitimate description of what I might be doing. A person can tell me to do what I consider to be different things, but insofar as I take myself to be following a rule I take myself to be continuing to do the same thing. For reasons such as these, to describe a rule as telling me what to do is to offer a description that is importantly different from a description of a person as telling me what to do. Nevertheless, there is a similarity between descriptions of following a rule and descriptions of being guided by a person. In both cases, I can also describe what I am doing by saying that I decided that I would follow, and that once I made that decision I took the rule, or the person, as the last arbitrator of what I was to do next.

Each of the passages discussed in this section began with a brief statement by means of which one might describe what it is like to follow a rule, and in each of these passages Wittgenstein went on to demonstrate why

such descriptions could be misleading. Notice that he never said that these descriptions were incorrect; he criticized those who would draw mistaken conclusions from them, but he did not on that account criticize those who used the descriptions.

At the beginning of this paper we saw Dummett complain that because of Wittgenstein's claimed focus on description, Wittgenstein rejected the possibility of criticism. We can now see how Wittgenstein would have answered Dummett. He would have acknowledged that he wants philosophers to leave language as they find it; if a particular description is commonly used, and a useful distinction is made by means of that description, then that description is in order. If Sally says she understood the first poem in a flash, but her understanding of the second dawned slowly, I know what she means, and there is no reason to say that she is mistaken in believing that she has given accurate descriptions.

But these descriptions also tempt philosophers to assume that there must be a similarity between coming-to-understand in a flash and events such as lightening strikes. That is, there is a temptation to assume that wherever a description applies, it applies in more or less the same way, and therefore that if two things are correctly described by the same description this is because they are relevantly similar. Wittgenstein does criticize falling prey to this assumption. But this sort of criticism is consistent with his claim that philosophy's job is description. It is not a criticism of the ordinary truths described by ordinary persons, it is a criticism of the claims philosophers make about what justifies or explains the legitimacy of descriptions. Wittgenstein rejects their assumption that similar descriptions must be justified by similarities between the things described; he rejects the idea that similarities between descriptions need any justification at all.

IV

Thus, Wittgenstein's 'exclusive' focus on description does allow him to offer some criticisms. In this and other ways his claim that philosophy must do away with explanation and restrict itself to description is more complex than it has appeared to many. My project has been to examine one aspect of Wittgenstein's concern with descriptions that has been overlooked; his interest in what descriptions are like, and what we can learn from describing descriptions. There are many related questions left to examine: Do philosophical descriptions play a special role? Is there only one type of philosophical description? What is a description of an attitude like? Etc. Careful attention to what Wittgenstein is doing with descriptions will help us to avoid erroneous interpretations of his work, and perhaps we will even find that there is something philosophically valuable to be gained by describing our descriptions.

NOTES

1 Wittgenstein (1989).

2 Wittgenstein (1958). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from this text. ³ This passage is also in Wittgenstein (1989), §89.

4 See Dummett (1991)p. xi. It is interesting that we find the following quote less than twenty pages later:

... we need to scrutinise our own linguistic practices with close attention, in order, in the first instance, to become conscious of exactly what they are, but with the eventual aim of attaining a systematic description of them.... Will [such a description] also settle the metaphysical controversies themselves? It is my contention that it will.... It will resolve these controversies without residue: there will be no further, properly metaphysical, question to be determined.

One could easily read this passage as advocating just the perspective on description Dummett rejected in his preface. Dummett might counter this by arguing that his position allows criticism, while Wittgenstein's does not. But see the end of section III of this paper.

5 Pears (1988), chapter 9.

6 The following are a few papers that discuss the idea that Wittgenstein advocated describing the uses of individual terms: Anscombe (1981); Butchvarov (1960); Hacker (1993), chapter 5; Hunter (1971).

7 Hacker (1972), p. 117.

8 Note that Wittgenstein is not identifying meaning with use, as evidenced by the phrase “though not for all”. In everyday language persons rarely talk about meaning in anything like the way philosophers do. The term “meaning” is most likely to come up when someone wants to know the meaning of a term. In this context, another way of putting what it is that that person wants to know is to say that he wants to know *how the term is used*. As far as I can see there is no reason to believe that Wittgenstein’s remark means anything more mysterious than this.

9 Wittgenstein (1980a), §964.

10 Wittgenstein (1980b), §385.

11 Wittgenstein (1967), §204.

12 Of course, if philosophers are to compare descriptions, we must have descriptions to compare, and we may create those descriptions. But it is not our job *as philosophers* to create those descriptions, any more than it is the job of one who studies blood to make that blood, even though he may get some of the blood he studies from his own veins.

13 There may be exceptions to this. For instance, I am told that the pain experienced when having bone marrow removed is an unlocated pain.

14 For more on this aspect of Wittgenstein’s thoughts about pain see discussions of his notion of criteria. Donagan (1966); Gert, B. (1989); Gert, H., (1995); Hintikkas (1986).

15 Perhaps the most recent attempt to argue for this is Langsam (1995).

16 Wittgenstein (1992).

17 Even in the actual world we believe that we can gain accurate knowledge of one another’s pains without being told about them. We generally gain this knowledge by seeing what has happened to the other person. But, unlike the case we are imagining, we unquestioningly accept that the wounded person is reliable in regards to his own pain in a way that no one else is.

18 Langsam (1995), p. 307.

19 For instance, see Wittgenstein (1958), §7, “I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-game’.” See also, § 16, §41, §44, §96, §249, §300, and others.

20 Kripke (1982), p. 7.

21 This point has also been made by Collins (1992), p. 75.

22 Kripke (1982), pp. 70±71.

23 See Wittgenstein (1958), p. 33, bottom of the page.

24 My thanks to an anonymous referee for emphasizing the point that it is the above sorts of facts about descriptions of rule following — that they must take into account context and practice — that grounds Wittgenstein’s argument against the possibility of private language.

25 See Wittgenstein (1958), p. 59, bottom of the page.

26 See Wittgenstein (1958), §214, §226.

REFERENCES

- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1981): ‘A Theory of Language?’, in I. Block (ed.), *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 148-158.
- Butchvarov, P. (1960): ‘Meaning-as-Use and Meaning-as-Correspondence’, *Philosophy* 35, 314-325.
- Collins, A. W. (1992): ‘On the Paradox Kripke Finds in Wittgenstein’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XVII, 74-88.
- Donagan, A. (1966): ‘Wittgenstein on Sensation’, in G. Pitcher (ed.), *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations*, New York: Doubleday, pp. 324-351. Dummett, M. (1991): *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gert, B. (1989): ‘Psychological Terms and Criteria’, *Synthese* 80, 201-222. Gert, H. (1995): ‘Family Resemblances and Criteria’, *Synthese* 105, 178-190.
- Hacker, P. M. S. (1972): *Insight and Illusion: Wittgenstein on Philosophy and the Metaphysics of Experience*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hacker, P. M. S. (1993): *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Mind*, vol. 3, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, pp. 147-149.

Hintikka, M. & J. (1986): *Investigating Wittgenstein* New York: Basil Blackwell, pp. 286-289.

Hunter, J. F. M. (1971): 'Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use', in Klemke (ed.), *Essays on Wittgenstein*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 374±393.

Kripke, S. (1982): *Wittgenstein: On Rules and Private Language*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

Langsam, H. (1995): 'Why Pains are Mental Objects', *Journal of Philosophy* XCI 6, 303-313.

Pears, D. (1988): *The False Prison*, vol. 2, New York: Oxford University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1958): *Philosophical Investigations*, New York: Macmillian.

Wittgenstein, L. (1967): *Zettel*, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (eds.), G. E. M. Anscombe, trans., Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1980a): *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. I, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. (1980b): *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. II, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. (1992): *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 2, G. H. von Wright and G. Nyman (eds.), C. G. Luckhardt, trans., Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. (1989): "Philosophie" §§86r93 (S.405-435) aus dem sogenannten "Big Typescript" (Katalognummer 213)', in H. Nyman (ed.), *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 43, pp. 175-203. English translation by C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue, as 'Philosophy: Sections 86r93 (pp. 405-35) of the So-Called "Big Typescript" (Catalog Number 213)', Heikki Nyman (ed.), *Synthese* 87(1), 1991, pp. 3-22.