

Being as We Ought
Rule-Following, Language-Use, and Persons
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This paper addresses arguments given by Kathrin Glüer, Anandi Hattiangadi, and Åsa Wikforss that language-use is not a matter of rule-following. I compare their views with those of Wilfrid Sellars, showing that Sellars' functional naturalism directly addresses issues in the current debate on the normativity of meaning, and in doing so offers a view that promises to pay larger philosophical dividends.

There are 3 parts to this paper. In the first I lay out the view of Glüer et. al. that while assessments of correctness are entailed by language-use, these conditions of correctness do not entail prescriptions for action. I detail two arguments that all three philosophers rely on to make this point. The regress argument supposes that if language-use was a matter of following a rule then to learn a language one must already know the rules of a metalanguage, and to learn the metalanguage, etc. The second argument supposes that because it is impossible to follow every rule enjoined by the correct use of a term, language-use cannot be a matter of being obliged to follow rules.

Part 2 of the paper lays out two Sellarsian distinctions: between rules of criticism and rules of action (with the corresponding ought-to-be's and ought-to-do's that express them), and between the non-agentive actualization of a disposition and the undertaking of an action. I then give a quick taxonomy of rule-following action, rule-conforming disposition, pattern-governed disposition, and merely pattern-conforming disposition. With these distinctions a Sellarsian notion of language-use as rule-following responds to both the regress and the impossibility arguments. The regress argument fails to gain traction because our evolved pattern-governed dispositions are capable of being made to conform to rules via a process of linguistic education without the learners as yet being capable of *following* a rule, while the impossibility argument is defused because one only need be obliged to be *disposed* to use one's terms correctly when speaking—we are not required to *follow* an infinite set of rules in using a term. At this stage of the paper I claim to have shown that by accepting the thesis that language-use implies conditions for correctly using expressions—a thesis accepted by Glüer et al.—and adding Sellarsian resources to this initial perspective in a step by step fashion, a chain of inferences takes us to a picture of language-use, rule-following, and persons that licenses a conditional that has as its antecedent a rule governing the use of a linguistic expression and as its consequent an action that is obliged in virtue of the meaning of the rule-governed linguistic expression of the antecedent. Thus, language-use implies prescriptions for action.

In the final part of the paper my attention turns to the nature of this conditional, which I argue encodes a material inference that is content-determinative of the terms occurring in the antecedent and consequent—namely, terms denoting human beings as evolved socio-linguistic persons. Just as the inference from “this is copper” to “this is disposed to conduct electricity” is

made explicit in an alethic implication expressing (part of) our understanding of the *natural* kind term ‘copper’ (Necessarily[this is copper \rightarrow this is disposed to conduct electricity]), so does The Revised Prescriptivity Thesis’ deontic implication—from being disposed to use a term correctly to what ought to be done to see to it that someone is so disposed—make explicit a material inference expressive of our understanding (in part) of the *normative* kind term ‘person’ as an evolved socio-linguistic creature. And just as the former material-inference-made-explicit is underwritten by a conception of the laws of nature, so is the latter underwritten by our conception of the rules of society and language-use. But whereas the laws of nature that underwrite our understanding of natural kinds are features of the world that obtain independent of our practices, it is only because we have shaped our rule-conforming dispositions by practices of education that the rules of society are capable of playing a correlate metalinguistic role in expressing an understanding of ourselves as evolved socio-linguistic persons. I close with some remarks on the philosophical naturalism at work here, suggesting that this account lets us see ourselves, as persons, as artifacts of our natural existence.