

Passages from “Some Reflections on Language Games” (1951)

1. [Regulism] It seems plausible to say that a **language** is a system of expressions the use of which is subject to certain **rules**. It would seem, thus, that learning to use a language is learning to **obey the rules** for the use of its expressions. However, taken as it stands, this thesis is subject to an obvious and devastating refutation. After formulating this refutation, I shall turn to the constructive task of attempting to restate the thesis in a way which avoids it. In doing so, I shall draw certain distinctions the theoretical elaboration of which will, I believe, yield new insight into the psychology of language and of what might be called “norm conforming behavior” generally. The present paper contains an initial attempt along these lines.
 2. The refutation runs as follows:
Thesis. Learning to use a language (L) is learning to obey the rules of L.
But, a rule which enjoins the doing of an action (A) is a sentence in a language which contains an expression for A.
Hence, a rule which enjoins the using of a linguistic expression (E) is a sentence in a language which contains an expression for E,—in other words a sentence in a *metalanguage*.
Consequently, learning to obey the rules for L presupposes the ability to use the metalanguage (ML) in which the rules for L are formulated.
So that learning to use a language (L) presupposes having learned to use a language (ML). And by the same token, having learned to use ML presupposes having learned to use a *meta-metalanguage* (MML) and so on.
But this is impossible (a vicious regress).
Therefore, the thesis is absurd and must be rejected. 1,2-28]
2. [Regularism] 3. Now, at first sight there is a simple and straightforward way of preserving the essential claim of the thesis while freeing it from, the refutation. It consists in substituting the phrase ‘learning to *conform* to the rules . . .’ for ‘learning to obey the rules . . .’ where ‘conforming to a rule enjoining the doing of A in circumstances C’ is to be equated simply with ‘doing A when the circumstances are C’—regardless of how one comes to do it. [It is granted that ‘conforming to’ is often used in the sense of ‘obeying’ so that this distinction involves an element of stipulation.] A person who has the habit of doing A in C would then be conforming to the above rule even though the idea that he was to do A in C had never occurred to him, and even though he had no language for referring to either A or C.
3. [A good thought that lies behind the inadequate suggestion that mere *conformity* to rules is enough.] What is denied is that playing a game *logically* involves obedience to the rules of the game, and hence the ability to use the language (play the language game) in which the rules are formulated. [5-29]
4. Sections 6-9 give “Metaphysicus” view: there is a *prelinguistic* awareness of the rules, or of the normative demands they make, couched in prelinguistic awareness of various universals.
5. Unfortunately, a closer examination of this “solution” reveals it to be a sham. More precisely, it turns out, on analysis, to be in all respects identical with the original thesis, and to be subject to

the same refutation. The issue turns on what is to be understood by the term ‘awareness’ in the phrase ‘becoming *aware* of a set of demands and permissions’. It is clear that if Metaphysicus is to succeed, **becoming aware of something cannot be to make a move in a game**, for then learning a game would involve playing a game, and we are off on our regress. Yet when we reflect on the notion of being aware of propositions, properties, relations, demands, etc., it strikes us at once that these awarenesses are exactly *positions* in the “game” of *reasoning*. It may be an over-simplification to identify reasoning, thinking, being aware of possibilities, connections, etc., with playing a *language* game (e.g. French, German), but **that it is playing a game is indicated by the use of such terms as ‘correct’, ‘mistake’, etc., in commenting on them.** [10-31]

6. [The good idea in the vicinity is:] Metaphysicus sought to offer us an account in which **learning a game involves learning to do what one does *because doing these things is making moves in the game* (let us abbreviate this to ‘because of the moves (of the game)’)** where **doing what one does *because of the moves* need not involve using language about the moves.** Where he went astray was in holding that while doing what one does because of the moves need not involve using language about the moves, it does involve *being aware* of the moves demanded and permitted by the game, for it was this which led to the regress. [11-32]
7. [W]e have tacitly accepted a dichotomy between
 - (a) *merely conforming to rules*: doing A in C, A' in C' etc. where these doings “just happen” to contribute to the realization of a complex pattern.
 - (b) *obeying rules*: doing A in C, A' in C' etc., with the intention of fulfilling the demands of an envisaged system of rules.
 But surely this is a false dichotomy! ! For it required us to suppose that the only way in which a complex system of activity can be involved in the explanation of the occurrence of a particular act, is by the agent envisaging the system and intending its realization. This is as much as to say that **unless the agent conceives of the system, the conformity of his behavior to the system must be “accidental”.** [12-32] [So what is needed is a conception according to which it is *not* accidental, but not consciously conceived by the agent as according to rule.]
8. What would it mean to say of a bee returning from a clover field that its turnings and wiggings occur *because* they are part of a complex dance? [14-33]
9. . Roughly, the interpretation would contain such sentences as the following: (a) The pattern (dance) is first exemplified by particular bees in a way which is *not* appropriately described by saying that the successive acts by which the pattern is realized occur *because of the pattern*. (b) Having a “wiring diagram” which expresses itself in this pattern has survival value. (c) Through the mechanisms of heredity and natural selection it comes about that all bees have this “wiring diagram”. It is by a mention of these items that we would justify saying of the contemporary population of bees that each step in their dance behavior occurs **because** of its role in the dance as a whole. [15-33]

10. we readily see the general lines of an account which permits us to say that learning to use a language is coming to do A in C, A' in C', etc., *because* of a system of “moves” to which these acts belong, while yet denying that learning to use a language is coming to do A in C, A' in C', etc., *with the intention of realizing* a system of moves. In short, what we need is a distinction between ‘**pattern governed**’ and ‘**rule obeying**’ behavior, the latter being a more complex phenomenon which involves, but is not to be identified with the former. Rule obeying behavior contains, in some sense, both a game and a metagame, the latter being the game in which belong the rules obeyed in playing the former game as a piece of rule obeying behavior. [16-34]
11. [WS endorses a central idea of classical American pragmatism (cf. “When Philosophy Paints its Blue on Grey”)] [T]he phenomena of **learning** present interesting analogies to the **evolution** of species.[16-34]
12. Pattern governed behavior of the kind we should call “linguistic” involves “positions” and “moves” of the sort that *would be* specified by “formation” and “transformation” rules in its meta-game if it *were* rule obeying behavior. Thus, learning to “**infer**”, where this is purely a pattern governed phenomenon, would be a matter of learning to respond to a pattern of one kind by forming another pattern related to it in one of the characteristic ways specified (at the level of the rule obeying use of language) by a ‘transformation rule’—that is, a formally stated rule of inference. [17-34]
13. I shall have achieved my present purpose if I have made plausible **the idea than an organism might come to play a language game**—that is, to move from position to position in a system of moves and positions, and to do it “**because of the system**” **without having to obey rules, and hence without having to be playing a metalanguage game** (*and a meta-metalanguage game, and so on*). [18-35]
14. Let us distinguish, therefore, between two kinds of learned transition which have status in a language game: (1) moves, (2) transitions involving a situation which is not a position in the game and a situation which is a position in the game. Moves are transitions (S-R connections) in which both the stimulus (S) and the response (R) are positions in the game functioning as such. [22-36]
15. [*L*]anguage entry transitions, as we shall call those learned transitions (S-R connections) in which one comes to occupy a position in the game (R is a position in the game functioning as such) but the *terminus a quo* of the transition is not (S is not a position in the game functioning as such). [22-36]
16. [W]e shall call **language departure transitions** these learned transitions (S-R connections) in which from occupying a position in the game (S is a position in the game functioning as such) we come to behave in a way which is not a position in the game (R is not a position in the game functioning as such). [23-36]
17. We thus notice **a certain equivalence between auxiliary positions and moves**. We also notice that while it is conceivable that a language game might dispense with auxiliary positions

altogether, though at the expense of multiplying moves, it is not conceivable that moves be completely dispensed with in favor of auxiliary positions. A game without moves is *Hamlet* without the prince of Denmark indeed! [26-37]

18. in spite of the **interesting relations** which exist in sophisticated **discourse between modal talk “in the object language” and rule talk “in the metalanguage,”** modal talk might well exist at the level of pattern governed (as contrasted with rule obeying) linguistic behavior. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the full flavor of actual modal discourse involves the way in which sentences in the first level language game containing modal words parallel sentences containing rule words (‘may’, ‘ought’, ‘permitted’, etc.) in the syntactical metalanguage. This parallelism is quite intelligible once one notes that the moves which are signalized in the object language by sentences containing modal words, are *enjoined* (*permitted*, etc.) by sentences containing rule words in the syntactical metalanguage. [27-38] [Cf. IM claim that “modal language is a transposed language of norms”]
19. [T]o say that it is a law of nature that all A is B is, in effect, to say that we may infer ‘x is B’ from ‘x is A’ (a *materially* valid inference which is not to be confused with the formally valid inference from ‘All A is B and x is A’ to ‘x is B’. ...[I]t is by virtue of its *material* moves (or, **which comes to the same thing, its material auxiliary positions**) that a language embodies a **consciousness of the lawfulness of things**. [29-38]
20. [I]f the pragmatist’s claim is reformulated as the thesis that the language we use has a much more intimate connection with conduct than we have yet suggested, and that this connection is intrinsic to its structure as language, rather than a “use” to which it “happens” to be put, then **Pragmatism assumes its proper stature as a revolutionary step in Western Philosophy**. [34-40]
21. Let us now turn our attention to *rule obeying behavior*. We have already noted that it involves a distinction between game and metagame, the former, or “object game” being played according to certain rules which themselves are positions in the metagame. Furthermore, we have emphasized that in an object game played as rule obeying behavior, not only do the moves exemplify positions specified by the rules (for this is also true of mere pattern governed behavior where even though a rule exists the playing organism has not learned to play it) but also **the rules themselves are engaged in the genesis of the moves**. The moves occur (in part, and in a sense demanding analysis) *because* of the rules. [38-41]
22. [A]ttention must be called to the differences between
‘bishop’ and ‘piece of wood of such and such shape’
‘My bishop is checking his king’ and ‘There is an open diagonal space between this
white piece of wood and that red piece of wood’
‘Interpose a pawn!’ and ‘Place this piece of wood between those two!’
Clearly the expressions on the left hand side belong to the rule language of chess. [41-42]

23. [T]he piece, position, and move words of chess are, in the process of learning chess language, built onto everyday language by *moves* relating, for example, ‘x is a bishop’ to ‘x is a -shaped piece of wood’, or by means of auxiliary sentences, for example, ‘x is a bishop if and only if x is a -shaped piece of wood’. In other words, chess words gain “descriptive meaning” by virtue of *syntactical relations* to “everyday” words. [43-43]

24. [W]e could say that non-chess words correlated with chess words acquire normative meaning by virtue of these syntactical relations with chess words having normative meaning. [44-44]

25. But it is not the purpose of this paper to follow up all the important and difficult topics involved in clarifying the status of metalanguages and the nature of the meta-meta- . . . -hierarchy. **Our concern is with the most general implications of the conception of a language as a game.** [48-47]

26. In concluding this paper, I shall make a few remarks about what we have called ‘action enjoining contexts’ [50-48]

27. We have, in effect, distinguished between three ways in which the thought of an action which I can perform here and now can be related to the doing of it. **I may do the action because I desire to do it (either for its own sake, or for the sake of its consequences), or because I am commanded to do it, or because I think I ought to do it.** It is only in the latter two cases that “action-tropic” mechanisms of language are involved. Learning the use of imperatives and normatives involves not only learning the intra-linguistic moves or “logical grammar” of these expressions, but also (subject to qualifications to be developed immediately below) **acquiring the tendency to move from occupying the position ‘Let me do A!’ or ‘I ought now to do A’ to the doing of A.** As we have already pointed out, they are positions from which we have learned to make language departure transitions. [51-48]

28. But if ‘I ought to do A now’ and ‘Let me do A!’ are both action enjoining or “prescriptive” positions, having a common tendency to bring about my doing of A, is there any genuine—more than “merely verbal”—difference between them? [53-49]

29. . Singular normatives are “implicitly universal.” [54-49]

30. . If after finding this comparison illuminating, one wishes to say that normatives are really implicitly universal imperatives, I would not object too strenuously. [56-50]

31. . “According to your account,” the challenge begins, “our consciousness of the ways of things is a matter of the ‘material moves’ of the language game in which we speak about the world. In other words, you claim that to know that all occasions of kind A are occasions of kind B is a matter of one’s language containing the move from ‘x is A’ to ‘x is B’.” It is along these lines that you account for the fact that we back up our assertion that an occasion is of kind B by *giving a reason*, namely that it is of kind A. On the other hand, when you describe the process whereby we come to adopt the language of which this move is a part, you give an *anthropological*, a

(very schematic) *causal* account of how languages comes to be used, and, presumably changed, in which you stress evolutionary analogies and cite the language of the bee hive. Do you not imply that there is no such thing as *giving a reason* for (or against) the decision to include a certain material move in the syntactical structure of one's language?" This challenge takes us to the very heart of an issue central to modern philosophy since Hume, namely, the reason-ability of our 'beliefs' in (particular) laws of nature. [57-50]

32. **Everyone would admit that the notion of a language which enables one to state matters of fact, but doesn't permit argument, explanation, in short *reason-giving*, in accordance with the principles of *formal logic*, is a chimera.** It is essential to the understanding of scientific reasoning to realize that the notion of a language which enables one to state empirical matters of fact, but contains no material moves is equally chimerical. The classical "fiction" of an inductive leap which takes its point of departure from an observation base undefiled by any notion as to how things hang together is not a fiction but an absurdity. The problem is not "is it reasonable to include material moves in our language?" but rather "Which material moves is it reasonable to include?" [63-52,53]
33. An understanding of the **role of material moves in the working of a language** is the key to the rationale of scientific method. And since, as we have seen, this role **can be characterized both as constituting the concepts of the language, and as providing for inferences, explanations and reasons relating to statements formulated in terms of these concepts**, it is clear that to be in a position to ask the question "Is it ever reasonable to assert one matter of fact on the basis of another matter of fact?" is to be in a position to answer with an unequivocal "yes!" [64-53]
34. [O]nce we realize that the problem is not "Is it reasonable to include material moves in our language?" but rather "*Which* material moves is it reasonable to include?" ... It comes home to us that the problem concerns the grounds on which a decision to use—that is, to teach ourselves—*this* language rather than *that*, can be justified. [65-53]
35. Viewed from within a used conceptual framework, with a sufficiently rich metalinguistic apparatus, observations belong to the *ordo rerum*. It is only when we reflect on the nature of a **decision to change conceptual frames** that it strikes us anew that **the making of an observation is the impact of the non-conceptual on the conceptual**. The *metalinguistic* position "U (meaning that p) was an observation utterance," which entails "p was the case", rests on no **privileged access** to the world. A sufficiently rich conceptual frame enables the one who uses it to recite the story of its achievements, and to support with reasons the claim that they are achievements. *But reasons are always positions within a frame*. We may conclude that x was an observation judgment; but observation judgments are not conclusions. [66-53]
36. [N]o giving of reasons for adopting a language game can appeal to premises outside all language games. [67-54]
37. [T]he problem is rather that of deciding *which* conceptual meaning our observation vocabulary is to have, our aim being so to manipulate the three basic components of a world picture, (a) observed objects and events, (b) unobserved objects and events and (c) **nomological connections, so as to achieve a world picture with a maximum of "explanatory coherence."** In this reshuffle, no item is sacred. On the other hand, it is obviously

reasonable to preserve the achievement status of as many observation claims as possible, for the more we preserve, the more the world picture we select is “based on observational evidence.” [67-54]

38. The difference between observation predicates and theoretical constructs is not that the former have a conceptual status independent of material moves (implicit definition) whereas the latter are implicitly defined predicates in a system which is ‘interpreted’ by a ‘dictionary’ which ties certain expressions in the theory with empirical constructs. Rather, **the conceptual status of theoretical and non-theoretical expressions alike is a matter of material (as well as formal) moves.** [68-54]
39. In principle, any theoretical sublanguage is a candidate for adoption into non-theoretical or background discourse, and we can imagine scientific contingencies which would make it reasonable to do so. **The temptation to freeze this boundary** arises from being convinced on (faulty) epistemological grounds that factual meaning is primarily the property of observation predicates, that “in the last analysis” there is (ought to be?) a fixed set of observation predicates (“sense data predicates”), and that any factual *primitive* which is not an observation term belongs (is?) on an island of theory connected by coordinating drawbridges with empirical constructs. [70-54,55]
40. At this stage the sentence ‘All ϕ ’s are ψ ’ looms as an “hypothesis,” *by which is meant that it has a problematical status with respect to the categories of explanation.* In terms of these categories we look to a resolution of this problematical situation along one of the following lines.
 - (a) We discover that we can derive “All ϕ ’s are ψ ” from already accepted nomologicals. (Compare the development of early geometry.)
 - (b) We discover that we can derive “If C, then all ϕ ’s are ψ ” from already accepted nomologicals, where C is a circumstance we know to obtain.
 - (c) We decide to adopt-and teach ourselves-the material move from “x is ϕ ” to “x is ψ ”. In other words, we accept “All ϕ ’s are ψ ,” as an unconditionally assertable sentence of L, and reflect this decision by using the modal sentence “ ϕ ’s are *necessarily* ψ ”. **This constitutes... an enrichment of the conceptual meanings of “ ϕ ” and “ ψ ”.** [71-55]
41. But it may be long before we arrive at a *decision*, and in the interim (always supposing that no exceptions turn up), we will say “it is probable that all ϕ is ψ .” The important thing is to realize that instead of “probable hypothesis” or “mere inductive generalization” being a *terminal* category, it is an interim category. And if we were to say (as it is often sensible to say) “It is probable that ϕ ’s are necessarily ψ ,” we should be giving notice that we expected a resolution of the problematic situation along the lines of either (a) or (c) above.[72-56]