

New Perspectives on Political Economy
Volume 2, Number 1, 2006, pp. 36 – 46

Rule-following, Praxeology, and Anarchy

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JEL Classification: B41, B53, B31, B2, P48, A12

Abstract: Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox has important implications for two aspects of Austrian theory. First, it makes it possible to reconcile the Misesian, Rothbardian, and hermeneutical approaches to methodology; second, it provides a way of defending a stateless legal order against the charge that such an order lacks, yet needs, a final arbiter.

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1 Introduction

The aim of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “rule-following paradox” is to diagnose a seductive error that Wittgenstein sees as underlying a variety of different philosophical mistakes: the implicit assumption of the need for and/or possibility of a *self-applying* rule. A further implication of Wittgenstein’s diagnosis is that human action is not reducible either to purely mentalistic or to purely behavioural phenomena.

If, as I shall argue, Wittgenstein’s analysis is correct, then, I shall further argue, the rule-following paradox has important implications for two aspects of Austrian theory.

First, Wittgenstein’s argument sheds light on the relation between economic theory and economic history – *i.e.*, between the aprioristic method of *praxeology* and the interpretive method of *thymology*, as Ludwig von Mises uses those terms in *Theory and History*. In particular, it shows that, just as thymological interpretation involves praxeological categories, so the possession of praxeological categories involves thymological experience – thus enabling a reconciliation of the superficially opposed insights of Mises’ Kantian approach, Murray Rothbard’s Aristotelean approach, and Don Lavoie’s hermeneutical approach to Austrian methodology.

Second, Wittgenstein’s argument provides a way of defending the stateless legal order advocated by Rothbard, Lavoie, and others. Critics of free-market anarchism often charge that a stateless society lacks, yet needs, a “final arbiter” or “ultimate authority” to resolve conflicts; but what such critics mean by a “final arbiter” turns out to be yet another version of the “self-applying rule” that Wittgenstein has shown is neither needed nor possible.

2 The Rule-Following Paradox

I’ll start by explaining the rule-following paradox. Suppose I present the following sequence of numbers: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16; and then I ask you to continue the series “in the same way.” I’m confident that you would continue with 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, and so on. But what grounds this confidence? By “the same way” I mean following the same *rule* – that rule being “add 2 each time.” But that is not the only rule that could generate my

initial series. Another rule that would also generate it is “add 2 each time until you get to 16, then start adding 3 each time.” Still another is “add 2 each time until you get to 4387, then start adding 12 each time.” Yet another is “repeat the even numbers between 2 and 20 over and over again.” And still another is “count by 2s up to 16, then count down again.” In fact there are infinitely many rules that would all generate the initial sequence 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, and then diverge at some point thereafter. How can I know that you will follow my interpretation of “continuing the series in the same way,” rather than some other interpretation?

It may quickly seem that I can never know this. No matter how far you continue the series in the way I expect, there is always some rule other than “add 2 each time” that could explain this, and the divergence between your rule and mine might emerge at the very next step. No finite sequence of numbers can ever guarantee that you are following my rule rather than some other.

Of course I can *ask* you what rule you are following. And perhaps you will say, “Oh, I’m adding 2 each time.” But does that really help? How do I know that you mean the same thing I do by the phrase “adding 2 each time”? The only way I can determine what you mean by those words is by seeing how you apply them – but as we’ve just seen, any finite empirical test will always be inconclusive on this question.

It may be suggested that what I mean by the words “add 2 each time” is the *simplest* procedure, and that all these other possibilities are more complicated. Well, it’s certainly the simplest given my language and my conceptual scheme – but might not some other rule be the simplest in some other language (perhaps yours) or some other conceptual scheme (perhaps yours)? Or even if my interpretation really is the simplest, why should I assume that you care about simplicity as much as I do? (You may assure me that you do indeed care about simplicity as much as I do, but that just throws me back on the question whether you mean by the word “simplicity” what I do.)

This will initially look like a *skeptical* question, a question as to how we can ever be sure what other people are thinking. But in fact Wittgenstein isn’t trying to drive home a skeptical moral at all; quite the opposite, as we’ll see. (Indeed, Wittgenstein is one of the most relentlessly *anti-skeptical* philosophers in history.) His eye is on other game. So what point *is* Wittgenstein trying to make?

Well, Wittgenstein goes on, suppose I could telepathically peer into your mind and see what rule you're following. It's tempting to think that that would settle the question. But would it? Let's say I peer into your mind and see the thought "add 2 each time" inscribed there in big shining ectoplasmic letters. What does that settle? What prevents you from cheerfully saying or writing *10, 12, 14, 16, 50, 40, 10, 12, 14, 16, 50, 40*, regardless of what words I see shining in your mind? What you mean by the *thought* "add 2 each time" depends on how you actually apply it in practice, just as much as what you mean by the spoken words does. As Wittgenstein writes:

I cannot know what he's planning in his heart. But suppose he always wrote out his plans; of what importance would they be? If, for example, he never acted on them. . . . Perhaps someone will say: Well, then they really aren't plans. But then neither would they be plans if they were *inside* him, and looking into him would do us no good. (Wittgenstein (1982) 234-235.)

Once we see that telepathy wouldn't solve the problem, we can see why Wittgenstein isn't pushing a skeptical moral. His primary interest lies not so much in the epistemological question "how can we *know* what rules people are following" as in the metaphysical question "what *is* it to follow a rule?" If it's not reducible either to my private thoughts or to my overt actions, what else is there for rule-following to *be*? This is a puzzle that arises just as much about one's own actions as about those of others. And it's not a skeptical puzzle, because I know perfectly well what rule I'm following; Wittgenstein never denies, indeed he readily grants, that I know what I mean by "adding 2 each time." In fact, he's happy to admit that I know what *you* mean by "adding 2 each time" also. The point of Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox is not to shake our confidence that we understand ourselves and one another; rather, it is to shake us free from a certain false picture of what such understanding is like.

The apparent problem with the spoken phrase "add 2 each time" is that it can be interpreted or applied in a variety of different ways. When I initially suppose that telepathy would resolve the question, what I'm supposing is that there's something in your mind that can't be interpreted or applied in different ways, something that carries its own interpretation or application with it. But that supposition is dissolved by Wittgenstein's thought-experiment where I peer into your mind and see your thought – but still don't know what I need to know.

The moral of the rule-following paradox, then, is not that following a rule is somehow mysterious or impossible, but rather that following a rule *would* have to be mysterious or impossible if it involved what we're tempted to think it involves: a *self-interpreting* or *self-applying* rule. That's what I was hoping to find by peering telepathically into your mind – but all I could find there was simply more stuff that required interpreting and applying. If I think that following a rule *must* somehow be anchored by the rule's having its application already built into it, then a close look at rule-following is bound to turn vertiginous, because there's no such thing to be found. As Wittgenstein puts it, “any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support.” But what he infers from this is not that grasping a rule is impossible, but rather that “there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’.” (Wittgenstein (1958) I. 201-202.)

In short, understanding a rule is not a matter of possessing some purely interior mental item; for any such item could be applied in a variety of ways. Nor, however, is it a matter of performing some finite sequence of bodily movements – because any such sequence is likewise compatible with a variety of different rules. And of course understanding a rule cannot be identified with some particular *combination* of an interior mental item and a finite sequence of bodily behaviour, for just the same reason. At this point we feel driven to vertigo because we're inclined to ask “what else *is* there for following a rule to be, if not interior thoughts, bodily movements, or some combination of the two?” But the reductionist impulse to explain action in terms of something else is part of the mistake that generates the paradox. One moral of the paradox is that action is an indivisible whole, of which thoughts and movements are aspects but not separable ingredients; *action* is more than the sum of its parts. The identity of my thoughts depends on how I translate them into action – not bodily movement, but action. As Wittgenstein puts it:

Thinking is not an incorporeal process which lends life and sense to speaking, and which it would be possible to detach from speaking rather as the Devil took the shadow of Schlemiehl from the ground. (Wittgenstein (1958) I. 339)

[A] move in chess doesn't consist simply in moving a piece in such-and-such a way on the board – nor yet in one's thoughts and feelings as one makes the move: but in the circumstances that we call “playing a game of chess”, “solving a chess problem”, and so on. (Wittgenstein (1958) I. 33.)

So what entitles me to think I know what rule you're following? Well, I'm thinking of a certain rule – but my thinking of that rule isn't a matter of shining words inscribed in my mind; rather, what rule my thought is about depends on how I express that thought in action. One way of expressing my thought of a rule is to *follow* that rule; but another is to identify instances where others are following the rule. As Wittgenstein notes:

What use of a word characterizes that word as being a negation? ... It is not a question of our first *having* negation, and then asking what logical laws must hold of it in order for us to be able to use it in a certain way. The point is that using it in a certain way is what we mean by negating with it. (Wittgenstein (1989) XX, p. 191)

The ability to apply a concept is thus part of having the concept; just as I don't count as thinking of a given rule unless I can successfully follow it myself, so I don't count as thinking of a given rule unless I can successfully identify the following of that rule in others. (In each case the application needn't be unerring, so long as it's reasonably reliable. My possession of the concept *cat* is consistent with my occasionally mistaking a cat for a dog or vice versa, but not with my doing so regularly.) Far from promoting skepticism, then, the moral of the rule-following paradox is anti-skeptical.

3 Implications for Austrian Methodology

What implications might Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox have for Austrian methodology? Ludwig von Mises introduced into Austrian theory a distinction between *praxeology*, the method of economic theory, and *thymology*, the method of economic history. Praxeology comprises a set of *a priori* insights into the nature and implications of human action; thymology involves identifying, via the hermeneutical method of *verstehen*, the particular means and ends chosen in particular cases. Thus praxeology, for example, states the laws governing monetary exchange, while thymology determines whether a particular interaction is in fact a case of monetary exchange. For Mises, thymology presupposes praxeology, since one must possess such concepts as means and ends before one can apply them. Praxeology, by contrast, does not presuppose thymology; Mises maintains, in Kantian terms, that we derive our praxeological categories not from experience but from the innate structure of the human mind.

The precise status of and relation between praxeology and thymology have been debated in Austrian circles ever since. For example, Murray Rothbard argued, in Aristotelean terms, that praxeological insight derives not from the mind's innate structure but from experience, and that it is *a priori* only *relatively*, being prior to more narrowly empirical sorts of experience. And Don Lavoie, invoking Gadamer, suggested that praxeology depends on hermeneutical *verstehen* just as much as thymology does.¹ And so on.

Mises' distinction raises further epistemological questions. Critics of Mises often seem to assume that he regarded the application of economic theory as an *a priori* matter; as we've just seen, he did not. But given that application is thymological rather than *a priori*, one might worry how economics can claim any scientific accuracy. For although delineating the relations among concepts of action may be a matter of apodictic certainty, it might seem that one could possess the total fund of praxeological knowledge and yet be clueless about its application and unable to explain any actual events. For if I am praxeologically mighty but thymologically weak, I might be able to write hefty tomes on, say, monetary theory, and yet be woefully unable to recognise monetary exchanges in real life – in which case I would be helpless in trying to explain historical events like depressions and hyperinflations. It may thus appear that praxeology is useless in explaining anything unless it is supplemented by thymology, which in turn seems to require some special knack of intuition whose presence or absence seems more a matter of luck than of scientific insight.

Here is where Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox becomes relevant. One of the morals of that paradox is that we don't count as possessing a concept unless we are – not perfectly reliable, but – *reasonably* reliable at applying it. It follows that the just-imagined scenario of praxeological proficiency combined with thymological ineptitude is not a real possibility; we don't count as possessing praxeological concepts except insofar as we are generally able to apply them accurately. Grasping an economic law is not, cannot be, a purely interior, private mental episode with no implications for our outward conduct – because that conception of the mental has been exposed as incoherent.

It further follows that the relation of dependence between praxeology and thymol-

¹ See Mises 1986 and 1995; Rothbard 1997; and Lavoie 1986.

ogy must be two-way rather than one-way. We can't have thymology without praxeology, because we can't apply concepts we don't possess; but equally we cannot have praxeology without thymology, because we can't possess concepts we are unable to apply. In that sense, Rothbard and Lavoie are correct in holding, against Mises, that praxeological insight requires some sort of experience; but Mises is equally right in insisting that praxeological insight is not derived *from* experience – since the relevant experience already involves praxeological categories. Praxeological and thymological understanding arise together; they are simply aspects – not separable components – of the single indissoluble whole which is intelligent human experience.²

4 Implications for Austrian Political Theory

Finally, let's turn to the rule-following paradox's implications for Austrian political theory. Many Austrians – including Rothbard, Lavoie, Hans Hoppe, Walter Block, Ed Stringham, and others³ – have defended a stateless legal order, or “free-market anarchy,” in which such traditionally governmental services as protection of rights and adjudication of disputes are provided via market competition with no monopolistic central authority. A frequent criticism of such an arrangement is that it lacks a final authority to resolve disputes. Without such an authority, what guarantees that disagreements will be resolved peacefully rather than triggering violent conflict? And how can a dispute ever be brought to a close if there is no final court of appeal, beyond which no further appeal is possible?⁴

The proper answer to such questions, I think, is to ask what guarantees the peaceful resolution of disputes under a government? Suppose you and I have a dispute, and the court rules in your favour. I can appeal the ruling to a higher court; but suppose I reach the highest court of appeal, and it too rules against me. Is that the end of the matter? It may or may not be, depending on what I choose to do next. I can petition the legislature to pass a law reversing the court's decision, or to appoint judges friendlier to my point of view; or I can try to foment a revolution to overthrow the government. There are plenty of options available to me; in that sense, no legal system, whether governmental

² For further discussion of the implications of Wittgenstein's ideas for Austrian methodology, see Long (2004).

³ See, e.g., Rothbard 1978, Lavoie 1993, Hoppe 1999, Block 2005, and Stringham 2006.

⁴ See, e.g., Bidinotto (1994).

or anarchic, can guarantee *absolute* legal finality. To be sure, many of my options involve a lot of hard work and are unlikely to be successful, and so I probably won't bother to pursue them; in that sense, governments *can* provide *reasonably reliable* legal finality – but now there's no reason to suppose that anarchies can't do so as well.

Defenders of government often complain that under anarchy, providers of legal services are not themselves subject to legal limitation, whereas under a constitutional government, the monopoly provider of legal services is limited by the *constitution*. But presumably a mere written document is not sufficient to limit the government's power; what's needed are actual institutional structures. But these sorts of constitutional restraints, such as checks and balances and divided powers, do not exist in their own right, as external limitations on society as a whole; on the contrary, they exist only insofar as they are maintained in existence by human beings acting in systematic ways. Hence they are just as available under anarchy as under government – *more* available, in fact, since a system that allows free entry into the market for legal services is obviously going to have more effective checks and balances than a system that monopolizes such services. As the anarchist Gustav Landauer once wrote: “The state is a relationship between human beings, a way by which people relate to one another; and one destroys it by entering into other relationships, by behaving differently to one another.”⁵ When Hobbesians worry that people won't be able to cooperate without a government, they forget that government is not some sort of automatic robot standing outside the social order it serves; its existence too depends on ongoing cooperation, both from the members of the government and from the populace it governs.

The opponent of anarchy has thus fallen into the same error as the one Wittgenstein diagnoses in his rule-following paradox: the error of supposing the possibility, and/or the necessity, of a self-applying rule. Just as one may initially be thrown into intellectual vertigo by the failure to locate some mental item that all by itself guarantees its own meaning regardless of how one goes about applying it in practice, so the opponent of anarchy is thrown into vertigo at the thought of a legal system lacking any component that all by itself guarantees social order regardless of how it is applied by human agents. Just as it's tempting to think that my grasp of a rule is something independent of my actions, something that *makes* me behave in a certain way, so it's equally tempting to

⁵ “Weak Statesmen, Weaker People,” *Der Sozialist*, 1910; quoted in Graham (2005), p. 165.

think that a society's legal system is something external to that society that *makes* it orderly. But as the rule-following paradox shows, there couldn't be any such self-applying entity; and since individuals do manage to follow rules pretty well most of the time – and since societies do likewise manage to maintain order pretty well most of the time – the absence of such a self-applying entity is no problem at all.

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