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# Freedom and Rule-Following in Wittgenstein and Sartre

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My aim in this essay is to establish what might initially and superficially seem to be an implausible if not bizarre claim, viz., that some central themes and arguments of the philosophies of the early Sartre and the later Wittgenstein are virtually identical. My strategy is to begin by outlining the strong family resemblance between Wittgenstein's approach to and treatment of his major topics — language, meaning, and rule-following — and Sartre's handling of his major topics — the nature of consciousness, human existence, and freedom. In this case the tracing of family resemblances leads to the establishment of blood relations. I don't mean that either Sartre or Wittgenstein influenced the other. Rather, to change the Wittgensteinian metaphor, it becomes, I believe, evident that the landscape sketched in the album which is *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>1</sup> is essentially the one captured in the montage footage of *Being and Nothingness*<sup>2</sup> — and that the story told about that landscape, in both the album and the *film noir*, is essentially the same.

To begin with Sartre, a favourite formula of his concerning consciousness, or the 'for-itself', or 'human reality', or freedom — these are all ultimately the same thing for Sartre — is that 'their existence precedes their essence'. In *Being and Nothingness* he sees this formula exemplified in the necessary self-consciousness of consciousness. Consciousness, says Sartre, is necessarily consciousness of an independent external ('transcendent') object, and it is also necessarily thereby, consciousness of itself. If it were not conscious of itself as consciousness of something, it would then be, he says, an unconscious consciousness, which for Sartre is

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. 3d. ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968). Subsequent references will be given by section number for part one, or page number for part two, preceded by *PI*.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956). Subsequent references will be to page numbers preceded by *BN*.

simply an absurdity (*BN* lii). Thus, to perceive is to be conscious of perceiving, to imagine is to be conscious of imagining, to count things is to be conscious of counting things. This consciousness (for example, of perceiving) is not a matter of ‘knowledge’, or as Sartre otherwise calls it, ‘positional’ or ‘thetic’ consciousness. When I see a tree my perception is a positional or explicit consciousness of the tree, and a non-positional or implicit consciousness of itself, the seeing. I attend to the tree and not to my seeing, yet I am still conscious of seeing. And if I weren’t ‘non-thetically’ or ‘non-positionally’ conscious of seeing, then I wouldn’t be seeing the tree: I couldn’t see the tree unless I realized that I was seeing it; I couldn’t count my money without realizing I was counting. If there is to be consciousness of anything at all, then there is self-consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

That consciousness necessarily involves self-consciousness means, for Sartre, that consciousness is necessarily self-creating and self-determining (*BN* lv). If it were to any degree an *effect* of something else it would to that degree, Sartre says, fail to be conscious of itself (“But consciousness is consciousness through and through” [*BN* lv]). Insofar as consciousness is necessarily self-conscious and so self-determining and self-creating, it can have no essence preceding its existence. For Sartre the ‘essence’ of something determines *how* that something will be (*BN* lv). Sartre considers the perhaps not quite felicitous example of pleasure. Pleasure (*pace* Ryle) is what it is only because and insofar as pleasure is some special way; there is something (special) that it is like (to be a case of pleasure). But then any given particular case of pleasure is always self-determined and self-contained: nothing constitutes this as a case of pleasure except that it is experienced as such. But this is just to say that its existence determines its essence, determines *what it is*, a case of pleasure, a case of that sort of thing. Since nothing determines how consciousness will be — i.e., whether it will be pleasure or pain, shame or pride, seeing, hearing, or imagining — except consciousness itself, it has no essence short of the contingencies of its existence.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Nagel joins Sartre in that philosophical tradition (*inter alia*, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel) which insists on the necessary self-consciousness of consciousness, when he offers the following necessary and sufficient conditions of consciousness: “But fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism — something that it is like *for* the organism” (“What is it like to be a bat?” in *Mortal Questions*, p. 166). Although in being explicitly conscious of insects or hairdos bats are implicitly conscious of what it is like to be a bat, unlike us, they can never be explicitly or thetically conscious of what it is like to be what they are. They can’t reflect, they can’t do phenomenology. Though Nagel does not mention Sartre, he appears to acknowledge his Sartrean affinities in offering the terms ‘*pour soi*’ and ‘*en soi*’ as a gloss on his terms ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’. See *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 168.

In his lecture *Existentialism and Humanism*,<sup>4</sup> Sartre declares the formula ‘existence precedes essence’, as applied to man, to be *the* hallmark of existentialism. Here he contrasts a man with an article of manufacture, a book or a knife. Insofar as a knife is producible in a certain manner to serve a certain purpose, its essence precedes its existence. Similarly, if God had made man it would have been, Sartre says, “according to a procedure and a conception, exactly as the artisan manufactures a knife, following a definition and a formula” (EH 27). In such a case, man’s essence would precede and determine his existence. But since, for Sartre, there is no God, the foregoing is not the case. However, Sartre also rejects the view of the eighteenth century philosophic atheists who held that though man is not created by a God, he still “possesses a human nature; that ‘human nature’, which is the conception of human being, is found in every man; which means that each man is a particular example of a universal conception, the conception of Man” (EH 27). Sartre rejects any such notion of Man or of human nature. As he goes on to explain: “What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world — and defines himself afterwards. . . . Man is nothing but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism” (EH 28).

The idea then behind the claim that existence precedes essence is that a man has no essence transcending his existence, transcending the way he is at any given time. And the upshot of this is that in some fundamental way men are free. In spelling out the nature of freedom Sartre’s formula about ‘existence preceding essence’ again comes to the fore. I shall return to that, but next I’ll turn to Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein does not use the formula ‘existence precedes essence’, but something very like this idea runs throughout his account of the nature of language in *Philosophical Investigations*, especially in his critique of the conception of the nature of language at work in the views of Frege, Russell, and the author of the *Tractatus*.<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein concedes that in the *Investigations* he too is trying to understand the essence of language, by which he means “its function and structure” which, he says, “lie open to view” (92). On this conception the essence of language in no way transcends its existence, i.e., the way it actually or *ordinarily* is. In contrast to this is the notion of the essence of language as something that is “hidden from us,” that “lies beneath the surface” (*ibid.*), or otherwise precedes or

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<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen & Co. 1948). Subsequent references will be to page numbers preceded by *EH*.

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. B. McGuinness and D. F. Pears (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).

transcends the manifest phenomenon of ordinary language, or as it were, language's *existence*. On this latter conception it is 'logic', as an account of the nature of meaning, which sets out the transcendent essence of language. Logic is "something sublime" and does not "concern itself with whether what actually happens is this or that" (PI 89). Logic not only constitutes the hidden essence of language as the pure article hidden beneath the impure article (PI 100), it is also, on this conception, hidden in our minds. It is not only sublime, it is subliminal. Thus at PI 102 Wittgenstein says, "The strict and clear rules of the logical structure of propositions appear to us as something in the background — hidden in the medium of the understanding." Similarly, in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*<sup>6</sup> he talks of the view where "logic is a kind of ultra-physics, the description of the 'logical structure' of the world, which we perceive through a kind of ultra-experience (with the understanding e.g.)" (I-8).

In contrast to all this, for Wittgenstein,

the philosophy of logic speaks of sentences and words in exactly the sense in which we speak of them in ordinary life when we say e.g. "Here is a Chinese sentence," or "No, that only looks like writing; it is actually just an ornament" and so on.

We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm. (PI 108)

The spatial and temporal phenomenon of language is, for Wittgenstein, the phenomenon of signs spoken or written, that is to say, *used*, in the course of various activities. This is language as the language-game, or as it might be put, this is the *existence* of language. There is no essence transcending the existence of language insofar as there can be no, as he calls them, 'super-concepts' (PI 97) — e.g., the *Tractatus*' 'objects' or 'simples' — that can function "outside a particular language-game" (PI 47). A so-called analysis cannot dig out the transcendent essence of an ordinary sentence; at best, it simply gives you *another* sentence that *may* be a form of the first sentence but is in no sense a more fundamental-form (PI 60-64). "Ordinary language is alright" (*Blue Book* 28)<sup>7</sup> just because it's all there is. There is no ideal essence of language preceding or determining or otherwise transcending its ordinary form, its existence.

This theme of existence preceding essence for things linguistic also comes out in Wittgenstein's discussion of so-called 'family resemblance concepts'. With a family resemblance concept like 'game', the concept is

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<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, 3d. ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978). Subsequent references are to part and section, preceded by *RFM*.

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958).

not an entity transcending all the actual examples one could give in explaining the concept (*PI* 66, 71, 75). So we might say there is no essence of games transcending the existence of actual games. The theme appears again in the discussion of ostensive definition. Just because, as Wittgenstein says, “an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case” (*PI* 28), such a definition is interpretation or understanding-dependent. That means that there are no necessary or essential conditions of understanding such a definition, transcending the sufficient and as it were ‘existential’ conditions of understanding such a definition in an actual case. Nothing more than what is sufficient to effect an understanding of such a definition is necessary or essential to understanding such a definition (*PI* 29). As Wittgenstein puts it in *Philosophical Grammar*,<sup>8</sup> a definition does not “act at a distance. It acts only in being applied” (p. 81). That’s to say, it does not transcend its interpretation or application in a particular case.

The case of ostensive definition is a particular case of a more general topic which Wittgenstein treats at length, viz., rule-following. The chief consideration that makes the notion of following a rule problematic is that, as with ostensive definitions, a rule is always susceptible of various interpretations. At *PI* 201 the problem of how it is possible to follow a rule is put this way: “no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action may be made out to accord with the rule” on some interpretation or other. A more graphic representation of the problem is given in the following brief exchange in *RFM*:

“But am I not compelled, then, to go the way I do in a chain of inferences?” — Compelled? After all I can presumably go as I choose! — “But if you want to remain in accord with the rules you *must* go this way.” — Not at all, I call *this* ‘accord’. — “Then you have changed the meaning of the word ‘accord’, or the meaning of the rule,” — No; — who says what ‘change’ and ‘remaining the same’ means here?

However many rules you give me — I give a rule which justifies *my* employment of your rules. (I-113)

The upshot of this sceptical paradox, as Kripke<sup>9</sup> calls it, is that in following a rule, the fundamental thing is not a transcendent rule which determines one’s action, nor even an interpretation of a rule which determines one’s action — the fundamental thing in rule-following is one’s *action*. There is no gap between a rule and its application. A rule does not transcend its application, or, to adapt Wittgenstein’s previous point about

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<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974). Subsequent references are to page numbers.

<sup>9</sup> See Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).

definition, we may say: a rule does not act at a distance (cf. *RFM* VII-60: “nothing stands between the rule and my action”).

A rule conceived as some kind of transcendent, application-independent entity cannot supply me with reasons which will not soon give out, “and then,” as Wittgenstein says, “I shall act without reasons” (*PI* 211); it cannot supply me with justifications for my action that will not soon be exhausted, whereupon I will have “reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do’” (*PI* 217). And whatever I suppose myself to be doing ‘according to a rule’, I will still “have to apply the rule in the particular case without guidance” (*PI* 292). The fundamental thing in rule-following is the *following*, the action. What makes such action construable as *rule*-following is only the further *action* of so construing it — and this is largely, and essentially, a matter of the actions of others towards the would-be rule-follower.

All of this can of course be cast in terms of meaning and use rather than rule and following. Thus in *RFM* Wittgenstein’s interlocutor says:

“But doesn’t e.g. ‘*fa*’ have to follow from ‘(x).*fx*’ if ‘(x).*fx*’ is meant in the way we mean it? . . . it is as if there were . . . something attached to the word ‘all’, when *we* say it; something with which a different use could not be combined; namely, the *meaning*. “All’ surely means: *all!*” we should like to say when we have to explain this meaning; and we make a particular gesture and face. (I-10)

But there is no such meaning somewhere in our minds, nor even in our dictionaries. Meaning does not transcend use. The meaning of a word is established and re-established in each instance of its use.

Taking a rule as the ‘essence’ of a certain case of behaviour — as it were, of a certain ‘existence’ — we can say that here, such an essence does not transcend existence. Similarly for the meaning of a word conceived as the essence of a certain case of using the word. Existence precedes and determines essence insofar as the use of a word precedes and determines its meaning.

Returning to Sartre, as was said above, he identifies what he calls consciousness or ‘the for-itself’ or ‘human reality’ or ‘man’ with what he calls ‘freedom’ or ‘choice’. “Freedom is the being of man” (*BN* 441) Sartre says, and as with man or consciousness, so for freedom, “its existence precedes its essence” (*ibid.*). What this means here is that the existence or life of an individual — the facts that constitute who and what he is — are not determined in any way by an essence to which his particular existence conforms, but rather the individual, as Sartre puts it, ‘chooses himself’, chooses what he is by choosing what he will do (*BN* 461, 479). This choice is completely undetermined, uncompelled, free. Indeed it *is* freedom, and this freedom is *we ourselves*. “Freedom is existence, and in it

existence precedes essence. The upsurge of freedom is immediate and concrete and is not to be distinguished from its choice; that is, from the person himself" (BN 568); or again, from *Existentialism and Humanism*: "For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's action by reference to a specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism — man is free, man *is* freedom" (p. 34).

On Sartre's view a person always has a 'project', or even, again, *is* a project, and this project is always freely chosen, or again is the choice which a person is. Sartre says, "we apprehend our choice — i.e., ourselves — as unjustifiable. This means that we apprehend our choice as not deriving from any prior reality but rather as being about to serve as the foundation for the ensemble of meanings which constitute reality" (BN 464). This latter in turn means that we always understand our 'world' in terms of our fundamental project; it is in terms of our project that things have for us the value or meaning that they have (BN 477). Because this project or choice does not derive from any prior reality, "we are perpetually engaged in a choice" (BN 465). "We shall never," says Sartre, "apprehend ourselves except as a choice in the making. But freedom is simply the fact that this choice is always unconditioned" (BN 479). Or again, "Since freedom is a being-without-support and without-a-spring-board, the project in order to be must be constantly renewed" (BN 480; cf. pp. 35, 461, 551). It is this notion of being perpetually engaged in a choice by virtue of its being undetermined by anything that has gone before, that constitutes the central link between Wittgenstein and Sartre. Turning to one of Sartre's analyses of a concrete example will help to bring out the kinship further.

In presenting his account of anguish as the reflective consciousness of freedom, Sartre discusses the case of the gambler. He there makes a point about the nature of resolutions. The inveterate gambler makes a resolution never to gamble again. But

when he approaches the gaming table, (he) suddenly sees all his resolutions melt away. . . . The earlier resolution of 'not playing anymore' is always *there*, and in the majority of cases when in the presence of the gaming table, he turns toward his resolution as if to ask it for help; for he does not wish to play, or rather having taken his resolution the day before, he thinks of himself still as not wishing to play anymore; he believes in the effectiveness of this resolution. But what he apprehends in anguish is the total inefficacy of the past resolution. . . . It seemed to me that I had established a *real barrier* between gambling and myself, and now I suddenly perceive that my former understanding of the situation is no more than a memory of an idea, a memory of a feeling. In order for it to come to my aid once more, I must remake it *ex nihilo* and freely. (BN 32-33)

This of course is old hat to those familiar with addiction, as witnessed by the well-known precept of Alcoholics Anonymous: take it one day at a



time. All the resolutions in the world count for nothing when it comes to the crunch, to the actual deed of gambling or refraining. Resolutions do not act at a distance. This is why, for Sartre, there is no gap between, on the one hand, resolution, intention, or choosing, and on the other, *doing* (BN 483-84). Every action is a choice and there is no choice short of the action. The intention is manifested in the act and has no existence elsewhere, or as it might be put, an intention has no essence transcending its existence in action. This is the nature of freedom.

The nature of rule-following, in Wittgenstein's account, exhibits the same structure. Consequently, even though Sartre is contesting the idea of either a God, or a human nature, or a "luminous realm of values" (EH 34), a "heaven of intelligence" (EH 28), or even previous resolutions as what determine or justify our actions, while Wittgenstein is arguing against the notion of a Platonic structure or internalized mental structure as determining and justifying our linguistic action, they nevertheless make their respective points in remarkably similar ways. Wittgenstein notes that an 'intuition' is of no help when it comes to how to apply a rule: "how do I know it doesn't mislead me. For if it can guide me right, it can guide me wrong" (PI 213). Similarly, Sartre says, in discussing 'the anguish of Abraham', "if a voice speaks to me, it is still I myself who must decide whether the voice is or is not an angel" (EH 31). At PI 188 Wittgenstein says, "it would almost be more correct to say not that an intuition was needed at every stage (of following a rule), but that a new decision was needed at every stage." This is in contrast to what one might characterize as the 'bad faith' of the Platonist: "All the steps are really already taken' means: I no longer have any choice" (PI 219). On the contrary, as regards rule-following, one might say that we are condemned to freedom. A decision or choice or resolution must be made, but again no decision or choice or resolution implements *itself* — decision and implementation are one. Thus Wittgenstein speaks of the impossibility of inserting "intermediate links between decision and action. . . . We can't cross the bridge to the execution until we are there" (*Philosophical Grammar* 160), while Sartre says that "Our description of freedom, since it does not distinguish between choosing and doing compels us to abandon at once the distinction between the intention and the act" (BN 484).

Wittgenstein takes mathematics as a central case of rule-following and many of the points he makes concerning mathematics find their reflection in Sartre's account of the structure of human existence. In this context Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations are targeted largely against the mathematical Platonist, who sees the mathematician as a discoverer of mathematical essences which constitute the relations between mathemati-

cal propositions. It is of the essence of such and such a proposition to follow from such and such another proposition and a mathematical proof discovers to us this essence as a transcendent rule leading us from one proposition to another. But for Wittgenstein, mathematics, no less than the rest of language, is a spatial-temporal phenomenon concerning the relations *we* establish between *signs*. The necessary relations between one sign and another is not determined by a transcendent meaning of the signs in advance of our understanding of and operations with them. At the beginning of *Philosophical Grammar*, Wittgenstein writes: “In attacking the formalist conception of arithmetic Frege says more or less this: these petty explanations of signs are idle once *we understand* the signs. Understanding would be like seeing a picture that makes them all clear. But Frege does not seem to see that such a picture would itself be another sign, or a calculus to explain the written one to us” (p. 40). Insofar as reference to *us* is ineliminable in the fundamental story of mathematical essences, Wittgenstein holds that “The mathematician is an inventor not a discoverer” (*RFM* I-168; also II-2, II-38).

Like remarks come from Sartre in his eschewal of human essences. He holds “that every man, without any support or help whatever, is condemned at every instant to invent man” (*EH* 34). “Man makes himself; he is not found ready-made . . .” (*EH* 50). The following passage from Sartre echoes Wittgenstein’s reproof of Frege. On being asked his advice on a crucial decision, Sartre replies: “You are free, therefore choose — that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world. The Catholic will reply, ‘Oh, but they are!’ Very well; still it is I myself, in every case, who has to interpret the signs” (*EH* 38). The only sense in which Sartre countenances the notion of an individual’s essence is that retrospectively one’s past can be deemed fixed and determinate. Thus his fondness for Hegel’s pun, ‘*Wesen ist was gewesen ist*’ — essence is what has been (*BN* 35, 120, 439). Essence so conceived, as essentially past, can have no determining power over my present, my existence, and indeed is itself preceded and determined by the existence which was my present in the past. Wittgenstein views mathematical essences in much the same way: “The proof doesn’t *explore* the essence of the two figures, but it does express what I am going to count as belonging to the essence of the figures from now on. — I deposit what belongs to the essence among the paradigms of language. The mathematician creates *essences*” (*RFM* I-32). Mathematical proofs are what get ‘deposited in the archives’ insofar as in mathematics, essence is what has been. But as essentially historical items such proofs can have no effective power in the present: “Even if I think of a proof as something

deposited in the archives of language — who says *how* this instrument is to be employed, what it is for?” (RFM III-29)

A final point about mathematical and human essences. Although, throughout *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre makes much of the fact that God’s nonexistence has the consequence that we are radically free — that is, we cannot excuse ourselves from responsibility for our choices by referring complaints or compliments to the Manufacturer — he admits at the end of that lecture that for existentialism, “even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view . . . what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God” (56). I take this to mean, among other things, that even if God existed, this would not mean that there is something that God knows that I do not know, viz., what my essence is, and what I will and must do in virtue of it. When it comes to my essence there is nothing for God to know, or in any case, nothing that I don’t already know myself. By the same token, Wittgenstein holds that it would be an illusion to think that the rational mind of a mathematician, even a Divine Mathematician, is at any rate animated by a mathematical essence determining all the moves at every future stage. “Suppose that people go on and on calculating the expansion of pi. So God, who knows everything, knows whether they will have reached ‘777’ by the end of the world. But can his *omniscience* decide whether they *would* have reached it after the end of the world? It cannot. I want to say: Even God can determine something mathematical only by mathematics. Even for him the mere rule of expansion cannot decide anything that it does not decide for us” (RFM VII-41; also see *PI* pp. 225-26). In an unfinished calculation there are no results that God *could* know. The ‘results’ depend on decisions that have not yet been made and perhaps never will. Even God cannot cross the bridge to the actual application of a rule until he is actually there.

There is a passage from Wittgenstein where he himself makes the connection between the structure of linguistic meaning and rule-following (i.e., the *use* of language) on the one hand, and the structure of human freedom and action of the other. In *RFM* he says,

It strikes us as if something else, something over and above the *use* of the word “all,” must have changed if ‘*a*’ is no longer to follow from ‘(x).*fx*’; something attaching to the word itself.

Isn’t this like saying: “If this man were to act differently, his character would have to be different.” Now this may mean something in some cases and not in others. We say “behaviour flows from character” and that is how use flows from meaning. (I-23)

I cannot give a more illuminating commentary on this passage than that provided by Crispin Wright in *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics*. He writes:

Wittgenstein commends as an analogy (to the relation between use and meaning) the relation between behaviour and character: it is the man's ever expanding tapestry of action and responses which reveals his character — and *all* that is revealed are further actions and responses. The ground for this conception of meaning is the central conclusion to emerge from the discussion of following a rule: to conceive of the content of a rule as something firmly established and stable, which each successive application objectively either implements or violates, is to conceive of grasp of such a content as something which we can recognize neither in others nor ourselves. We cannot significantly give our sincere inclination to make *this* application of *this* rule such a dignity. There is, in the end, only the inclination. (In a comparable sense, a man cannot act out of character).<sup>10</sup>

He cannot act out of character because his action *is* his character; his existence at every moment determines his essence, and not the other way round. Sartre puts the point this way: “Thus we find no given in human reality in the sense that temperament, character, passions, principles of reason would be acquired or innate *data* existing in the manner of things. The empirical consideration of the human being shows him as an organized unity of conduct patterns or of ‘behaviours’. To be ambitious, cowardly, or irritable is simply to conduct oneself in this or that manner in this or that circumstance. The Behaviourists were right in considering that the sole positive psychological study ought to be of conduct in strictly defined situations” (*BN* 476).

Sartre is not quite embracing behaviourism here, as anyone familiar with *Being and Nothingness* will know, anymore than Wittgenstein, or even Ryle, can rightly be said to be behaviourists. They would perhaps be better denominated by Michael Dummett's term ‘anti-realist’. To be an anti-realist about linguistic meaning is not to deny that there is such a thing as meaning, but to deny that it transcends the actual *use* of language, the actual practice which is deemed meaningful. To be an anti-realist about minds or character traits is not to deny that there are minds or character traits, but to deny only that their story transcends the story of conscious beings behaving in various ways. When, in connection with rule-following, Wittgenstein debunks the idea that “the understanding is itself a state which is the *source* of the correct use” (*PI* 146), he is not saying that there is no such thing as understanding a rule, but that there is no such thing which isn't just the application of a rule.

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<sup>10</sup> Crispin Wright, *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Having brought in Crispin Wright, let me bring in briefly two other of Wittgenstein's commentators. Saul Kripke's book *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* is a brilliant exposition of Wittgenstein's central argument as consisting of a sceptical paradox met with a so-called sceptical solution. I won't recaptulate Kripke's account, but I want to mention one aspect of the sceptical solution to the paradox. Kripke says that the solution to the paradox can be restated in terms of a device that is common in philosophy, viz., inversion of a conditional. This is a device, Kripke says, for reversing priorities, and he gives as examples, 'we do not cry because we feel sorry, we feel sorry because we cry' (James), 'fire and heat are not constantly conjoined because fire causes heat; fire causes heat because they are constantly conjoined' (Hume), 'we do not all say  $12 + 7 = 19$  and the like because we all grasp the concept of addition; we say we all grasp the concept of addition because we all say  $12 + 7 = 19$  and the like' (Wittgenstein) (*Wittgenstein on Rules*, n. 76). Now recalling the point just made about character and meaning, a Sartrean inverted conditional might be put this way: We do not act so and so because we have a certain character or nature, we have a certain character or nature because we act so and so. And in general, we do not have such and such an existence because we have such and such an essence, we have such and such an essence because we have such and such an existence.

Kripke's book is so good just because it answers the challenge Stanley Cavell issued twenty-six years ago about making Wittgenstein's later philosophy available. Indeed Kripke's book, though highly original, can be viewed as largely an elaboration of the following celebrated paragraph from Cavell's essay 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy':

(Wittgenstein) wishes to indicate how inessential the "appeal to rules" is as an explanation of language. For what has to be "explained" is, put flatly and bleakly, this.

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation — all the whirl organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying. To attempt the work of *showing* its simplicity would be a real step in making available Wittgenstein's later philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Stanley Cavell, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', in *Wittgenstein, The Philosophical Investigations*, ed. George Pitcher (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1966), pp. 160-61.

The terror that Cavell identifies here can be seen, I think, as a certain case of the anguish which Sartre says just is one's reflective consciousness of one's own freedom. The freedom in this case consists in the fact that nothing — apart from one's own spontaneity — insures that one will be able to project words into new contexts, and the terror is only heightened by the realization that all others are in the same existential boat, with communication the hostage of our mutual linguistic freedom.

This returns us to a point discussed earlier concerning Wittgenstein's and Sartre's shared view on the unavoidability of choosing given the gaplessness between decision or intention, and act (or application of a rule); this is in contrast to the bad faith of the Platonist who holds that there is actually no scope for choice, all the steps really being already taken. The reader may have doubts about this interpretation of Wittgenstein given the complete text of *PI* 219. It reads:

“All the steps are really already taken” means: I no longer have any choice. The rule, once stamped with a particular meaning, traces the lines along which it is to be followed through the whole of space. — But if something of this sort really were the case, how would it help?

No; 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. I obey the rule *blindly*.

Those final sentences — “When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule *blindly*” are ambiguous in the context of the whole remark. They may be read as saying that when I obey a rule I do not pick and choose between alternatives, but simply forge ahead *blindly*, without guidance — but then in one sense I *do* choose, since how I go on is entirely up to me. This is my preferred reading. Alternatively, they could be read as illustrations of the point made immediately prior to them, viz., ‘*This is how it strikes me*’: it strikes me as if, when I obey a rule, all the steps are already taken and I do not choose. It strikes me as if I obey a rule *blindly*, i.e., in blind obedience to a univocal rule. This may indeed be how it strikes one, but that is compatible with one in fact choosing. This reading picks up a point central to both Wittgenstein and Sartre, viz., that our unhesitating action produces the illusion of having no choice, and thereby, on Sartre's account, relieves us of the anguish which consciousness of our freedom would produce.

At the end of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre discusses what he calls ‘the spirit of seriousness’, whereby, “Man pursues being *blindly* by hiding from himself the free project which is this pursuit. He makes himself such

that he is *waited for* by all the tasks placed along his way. Objects are mute demands, and he is nothing in himself but the passive obedience to these demands” (626). Much earlier in the book (p. 38) he discusses the homely example of one’s relation to a ringing alarm clock: it is my blind obedience to the alarm that constitutes its apparent authority, and spares me the anguish of considering sleeping in as an option. Recalling to us Cavell, Sartre then generalizes:

All these trivial passive expectations of the real, all these commonplace everyday values, derive their meaning from an original projection of myself which stands as my choice of myself in the world. But to be exact, this projection of myself toward an original possibility, which causes the existence of values, appeals, expectations, and in general a world, appears to me only beyond the world as the meaning and the abstract, logical significance of my enterprises. For the rest, there exist concretely alarm clocks, signboards, tax forms, policemen, so many guard rails against anguish. (BN 39)

One’s active engagement in the everyday world does not relieve one of having to make choices, only of the potential anguish in doing so. But when one stands back, disengaged, and reflects, Cavell’s terrifying insight, glimpsed by the Kripkean sceptic, comes to the fore:

But as soon as the enterprise is held at a distance from me, as soon as I am referred to myself because I must await myself in the future, then I discover myself suddenly as the one who gives its meaning to the alarm clock, the one who by a signboard forbids himself to walk on a flower bed or on the lawn, the one from whom the boss’s order borrows its urgency, the one who decides the interest of the book which he is writing, the one finally who makes the values exist in order to determine his action by their demands. I emerge alone and in anguish confronting the unique and original project which constitutes my being; all the barriers, all the guardrails collapse, nihilated by the consciousness of my freedom. I do not have nor can I have recourse to any value against the fact that it is I who sustains values in being. Nothing can ensure me against myself, cut off from the world and from my essence by this nothingness which I *am*. I have to realize the meaning of the world and of my essence; I make my decision concerning them — without justification and without excuse. (ibid.)

Wittgenstein’s discussion is characteristically nothing so portentous as Sartre’s, but similar imagery occurs to him in making his point. Just before *PI* 219, he asks, “Whence comes the idea that the beginning of a series is a visible section of rails invisibly laid to infinity? Well, we might imagine rails instead of a rule” (218). *RFM* VII-66 begins, “Why do I always speak of being compelled by a rule; why not of the fact that I can *choose* to follow it? For that is equally important,” and continues further on: “My question really was: ‘How can one keep to a rule?’ And the picture that might occur to someone here is that of a short bit of hand rail, by means of which I am to let myself be guided further than the rail reaches. (But there is nothing there; but there isn’t *nothing* there!).” Finally, when Wittgenstein says at *PI* 238 that, “the rule can only seem to me to produce all its

consequences in advance if I draw them as a *matter of course*,” this doesn’t mean I do not choose how to follow the rule, but only that so long as it is a matter of course, so long as one is engaged in the language-game, there will be no anguish about it; it will strike me as if all the steps are really already taken, that I obey the rule blindly — or mechanically: “One follows the rule *mechanically*. Hence one compares it with a mechanism. ‘Mechanical’ — that means: without thinking. But *entirely* without thinking? Without *reflecting*” (RFM VII-60).

I believe that by this point more than just a strong family resemblance between Sartre’s and Wittgenstein’s respective treatments of their respective topics has been established. Their respective topics were never, in any case, to be clearly distinguished. We may say, summarily, that Sartre’s topic is human existence, while Wittgenstein’s is human language. But for Wittgenstein these phenomena are indistinguishable. Just because his sketches “are really remarks on the natural history of human beings” (PI 415), the hum-drum word ‘language’ is insufficiently evocative. Thus he coins the term ‘language-game’: “I shall call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-game’” (PI 7); and the term ‘form of life’: “Here the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (PI 23); “. . . to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (PI 19). It would be wrong to suppose that Wittgenstein treats in the small what Sartre treats in the large, or even that language and rule-following are a special case of, and their analysis a special application of, what Sartre is on about. Human existence just is linguistic existence, even as language cannot be abstracted from a form of life. Sartre declares simply, “I *am* language” (BN 372).

These claims, however, may seem to be undermined by a remaining key issue on which Wittgenstein and the early Sartre are, I believe, widely thought to be fundamentally at odds. Sartre’s early philosophy is notoriously individualistic; the nature of the individual consciousness appears to provide all the resources for his seventeenth century style grand system. This may seem hardly to jibe with the emphasis on the social in the grand anti-system which is Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. But in fact the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Sartre are never so similar as in their account of how meaning is generated from the dialectic of the individual and the social.

A controversy currently swirls about the import of Wittgenstein’s ‘private language argument’, centering on the ambiguity of the terms ‘private’ and ‘public’<sup>12</sup>. Does ‘private’ mean ‘inner’ or ‘mental’, and

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<sup>12</sup> The relevant figures in this controversy include Kripke, Wright, and Norman Malcolm



‘public’, ‘outer’ or ‘behavioural’, or does ‘private’ mean ‘solo’ or ‘only one’, and ‘public’, ‘more than one’? For various reasons that cannot be gone into here, I opt for the latter interpretation (taking the former sense of ‘private’ to be a special case of the latter). The upshot of the private language argument I take to be that an individual, all on her own, could not be a rule-follower; such a scenario could not provide the wherewithal for distinguishing between following a rule and merely thinking one was following a rule. No model of meaning or rules subsisting in a Platonic sky above, a lapidary decalogue below, or a Cartesian soul within could determine that not just anything may count as being in accord with the rule. What I do now can be reckoned ‘the same’ as what I’ve done before, according to some rule, if and only if what I do now can be reckoned to be ‘the same’ as what *others* do. How is *that* determined? Largely by how others react to what I do when purporting to be following such and such a rule. The point is not that I may refer to what others do for guidance in following a rule, in lieu of reference to a Platonic rule or some inner set of instructions and intentions — what others do is no less susceptible of various interpretations, and when it comes to applying a rule in the particular case, I am always thrown back on my own resources for fashioning the meaning. But unless there *were* others among whom or across whom sameness or agreement could be established, there could be no foothold for assessing a series of acts on my part as having *a* meaning, i.e., as being the same or different according to some rule. Though a rule does not transcend the brute action of its application by some individual, it is only in the medium of a community of other would-be rule-followers that an individual’s action can be rule-following at all, successful or unsuccessful.

This very story of the dialectic of individual and community in the constitution of meaning is told in the one place in *Being and Nothingness* where Sartre discusses the nature of language at any length, viz., sub-section D — ‘My Fellowman’ — of section II — ‘Freedom and Facticity: The Situation’ — of chapter one, of part four.

He begins his discussion of language with a markedly ‘Wittgensteinian’ ground level thought: “Belonging to the *human species (espece)* is defined by the use of very elementary and very general techniques: to know how to walk, to know how to take hold, to know how to pass judgment on the surface and the relative size of perceived objects, to know how to speak, to know how in general to distinguish the true from the

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on the one side, and P. M. S. Hacker, G. P. Baker, and Colin McGinn on the other. I discuss, and take sides in the dispute in an as yet unpublished paper entitled ‘The Private Language Quarrel’, read to the University of Calgary philosophy department in April 1986.

false, etc.” (BN 512)<sup>13</sup>. These techniques, Sartre says, confer on the world its meanings, but since one has not chosen these techniques any more than one has chosen membership in the human species, Sartre considers whether one’s confrontation with techniques not of one’s own making and with a world of meanings which do not emanate from oneself is compatible with the picture of one’s radical freedom which he has heretofore drawn (BN 511-12).

Sartre’s general aim is to show “that the existence of meanings which do not emanate from the for-itself cannot constitute an external limit of its freedom” (BN 519), but rather that “the for-itself is free but *in condition*, and it is the relation of this condition to freedom that we are trying to define by making clear the meaning of the situation” (BN 519). The concept of a ‘situation’ or of ‘being situated’ is central in Sartre’s thought. One is inevitably in situations, one cannot not be situated, but one’s situation is always of one’s own making insofar as one is constantly ‘in transit’, constantly surpassing one’s past and present by projecting a future beyond them. He says here that “the characteristic of the situation . . . (is) nothing else but the ekstastic connection of the present, the future, and the past — that is, the free determination of the existent by the not-yet-existing and the determination of the not-yet-existing by the existent” (BN 518). It is given this structure of the situation, and because man is essentially situated, that Sartre tenders his paradoxical definition of man as the being ‘who is not what he is and who is what he is not’ (BN *passim*). The presence of meanings not of one’s own making is not a limitation of one’s freedom, but the very medium for its exercise:

But it is necessary for us again to stress the undeniable fact that the for-itself can choose itself only beyond certain meanings of which it is not the origin. Each for itself, in fact, is a for-itself only by choosing itself beyond nationality and species just as it speaks only by choosing the designation beyond the syntax and the morphemes. This ‘beyond’ is enough to assure its total independence in relation to the structures which it surpasses; but the fact remains that it constitutes itself as *beyond* in relation to *these* particular structures. What does this mean? It means that the for-itself arises in a world which is a world for other for-itselfs. Such is the *given*. And thereby, as we have seen, the meaning of the world is *alien* to the for-itself. This means simply that each man finds himself in the presence of *meanings* which do not come into the world through him (BN 520).

The central case where one finds oneself in the presence of meanings which do not come into the world through oneself, is language. But this fact is easily misunderstood, especially in the tendency to project a Pla-

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein: “Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing” (PI 25). It is perhaps worth noting that Sartre’s use of the term ‘technique’ is as pervasive, if as vague, as Wittgenstein’s.

tonic or ultra-physical abode of 'true' meaning, the essence of language, which governs the actions of would-be language users. Sartre inveighs against such conceptions: "It has been maintained recently<sup>14</sup> that there is a sort of living order of words, the dynamic laws of speech (*langage*), and impersonal life of the logos — in short that speech is a Nature and that to some extent man must obey it in order to make use of it as he does with Nature. . . . People have made of speech a *language (langue) which speaks all by itself*" (BN 516). But no rule carries its own interpretation, no rule applies itself, and on Sartre's view, "freedom is the only possible foundation of the laws of language" (BN 517).

Like some good Fregean (despite his anti-Platonist outburst), Sartre insists on the primacy of the sentence over the word: "The elementary structure of speech is the *sentence*. It is within the sentence, in fact, that the word can receive a real function as a designation; outside of the sentence the word is just a propositional function — . . ." (BN 514). He derives from this what can only be characterized as a 'use theory of meaning': "The word therefore has only a purely *virtual* existence outside of complex and active organizations which integrate it. It cannot exist 'in' a consciousness or an unconscious *before* the use which is made of it: the sentence is not *made out of words* . . . If this is true, then neither the words nor the syntax, nor the 'ready made sentences' pre-exist the use which is made of them" (BN 514-15). He concludes, "But if the sentence pre-exists the word, then we are referred to the speaker as the concrete foundation of his speech" (BN 515).

For Sartre then, the sense in which language is a rule or law governed phenomenon must be fundamentally distinguished from the sense in which natural events are law governed.

Thus we can grasp the clear distinction between the event 'sentence' and a natural event. The natural fact is produced in conformity to a law which it manifests but which is a purely external rule of production of which the considered fact is only one example. The 'sentence' as an event contains within itself the law of its organization, and it is inside the free project of *designation* that legal (i.e. grammatical) relations can arise between words. In fact, there can be no laws of speaking before one speaks. . . . Far from presiding over the constitution of the sentence and being the mould into which it flows, (grammatical laws) exist only in and through this sentence. In this sense the sentence appears as a free invention of its own laws. We find here simply the original characteristic of every situation . . . (BN 517-18).

Sartre's distinction between sentences and natural events calls to mind Wittgenstein's claims for the 'autonomy of grammar', that grammatical

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<sup>14</sup> Sartre cites Brice-Parain, *Essai sur le logos platonicien*.

rules “are not accountable to any reality” (*Philosophical Grammar* 184). In *Zettel*<sup>15</sup> he asks:

Why don't I call cookery rules arbitrary, and why am I tempted to call the rules of grammar arbitrary? Because cookery is defined by its end, whereas 'speaking' is not. That is why the use of language is in a certain sense autonomous, as cookery and washing are not. You cook badly if you are guided by rules other than the right ones; but if you follow other rules than those of chess you are *playing another game*; . . . (320)

There can, however, be no *private* games. The language-game is there before I begin to play, and I could not play at all were there not others in terms of whom my action could count as playing, as e.g., uttering sentences. Nevertheless, each individual is thrown back on her own resources as to how she shall get in the great game. In reconstructing the linguistic dialectic of individual and community, Sartre writes:

This enables us to outline tentatively a solution for the relations of the individual to the species. Without the human species, mankind, there is no truth; that is certain. There would remain only an irrational and contingent swarming of individual choices to which no law could be assigned. If some sort of truth exists capable of unifying the individual choices, it is the human species which can furnish this truth for us. But if the species is the truth of the individual, it cannot be a *given* in the individual without profound contradiction. As the laws of speech are sustained by and incarnated in the concrete free project of the sentence, so the human species (as an ensemble of peculiar techniques to define the activity of men) far from pre-existing an individual who would manifest it in the way that this particular fall exemplifies the law of falling bodies, is the ensemble of abstract relations sustained by the free individual choice. (*BN* 519)

The fall of man indeed exemplifies anything but the law of falling bodies, for our expulsion from the garden marks an epochal dislocation within the natural realm. Meaning enters the world as we take our leave from the other animals, and from an essence of the human species that would force us to behave as we do, just as salmon are forced to return upstream. Just for this reason, two features, by long-standing tradition, set us apart from the other animals: we are the rational or talking animals, and we have 'free will'. The philosophies of Wittgenstein and Sartre disclose an internal connection between these two features. To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life or way of acting about which, when asked, 'But isn't *the same* at least the same?' (*PI* 215), the answer is no. Only a being who is not what it is and is what it is not, could follow a rule, use a word, forge a meaning.<sup>16, 17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, 2d. ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> I believe Wittgenstein's conception of meaning and rule-following is rather made to order for an analysis in terms of the Sartrean notion of '*négativité*'. Sartre's notion is developed

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in connection with 'Gestalt' perception, a topic central to Wittgenstein's later thought on meaning. Other points of contact between Wittgenstein and Sartre that may be worth developing include Wittgenstein on bad faith in mathematics ("It is possible for one to live, to think, in the fancy that things are thus and so, without *believing* it; . . ." *RFM II* — 12); Wittgenstein on 'the look' (*Zettel* 221-23); Wittgenstein on soul and body ("Then human body is the best picture of the human soul," *PI* 178), and Sartre ("The body is the psychic object *par excellence* — *the only psychic object*," *BN* 347; also 310); Sartre on "the *cogito* of the Other's existence" (*BN* 251), and Wittgenstein ("My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul," *PI* 178); Sartre's critique of the notion of sensation as "inside the box" (*BN* 314), and Wittgenstein's (*PI* 293). *BN* 330 suggests Sartre's possible acquaintance with the *Tractatus*. 'Saying/showing' themes run throughout *BN*, as they do throughout Wittgenstein's *PI*.

<sup>17</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read to the department of philosophy at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, in February, 1985. I thank those present for their comments.