GINET ON WITTGENSTEIN’S ARGUMENT AGAINST PRIVATE RULES

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1. Carl Ginet’s ‘Wittgenstein’s Argument that One Cannot Obey a Rule Privately’¹ is, if think, the best sustained attempt to explain why there can be no practice associated with private rules.

Ginet takes Wittgenstein’s argument against private rules to be:

(I) For any rule and any particular act, if the fully informed judgment of (at least an overwhelming majority of) the actual and potential users of the rule would be that the act is in accordance with the rule, then it follows that the act is in accordance with the rule.

∴ (II) If one can act in accordance with a rule in the circumstance that the actual and potential users of the rule are necessarily restricted to oneself, then one’s making a fully informed judgment that one’s act is in accordance with the rule entails that one’s act is in accordance with the rule.

(III) It is not possible that there should be a rule such that from a person’s making a fully informed judgment that an act of his is in accordance with the rule it follows that the act is in accordance with the rule.

∴ (IV) It is not possible to act in accordance with a rule in the circumstance that the actual and potential users of the rule are necessarily restricted to oneself.²

(I) is intended as a partial explication of what Wittgenstein meant by his dictum that obeying a rule is a practice. It is supposed to state the only sorts of facts that can determine definitively whether or not a particular act conforms to a rule and to constitute a genuine (informative) criterion for the conformity of a particular case to a rule. “If the fully informed judgments of all (or nearly all) of these [actual and potential users of the rule] would be in agreement that a particular case conforms (or not), then
that (subjunctive conditional) fact makes it the case that it conforms or not.”

Ginet's argument for (III) depends upon two premises:

(A) It is not possible that there should be a rule such that, necessarily, every act that falls under the rule is in accordance with the rule.

(B) For any rule there is a related rule — call it the correct self-judging rule for that rule — such that (i) a person's act falls under this rule if and only if it is an act of making a fully informed judgment that an act of his is in accordance with the rule and (ii) such an act (of making a fully informed judgment that an act is in accordance with the original rule) is in accordance with this related correct self-judging rule if and only if the act judged is in accordance with the original rule.

If we assume that there is a rule R which falsifies (III), then, by (B), there is a rule, the correct self-judging rule for R, which falsifies (A). So (III) follows from (A) and (B). (A) is supposed to capture the intuition that one should not automatically succeed in trying to obey a genuine rule.

The application of the argument against private rules to the private language case depends upon two assumptions. The first is that the diarist must follow rules for the application of kind names to his private objects; the second is that the diarist is necessarily the only actual or potential user of those rules. Since he is necessarily the only user — actual or potential — of those putative rules, he cannot act in accordance with them and, without them, he cannot speak a private language.

2. Setting aside for now the question of whether Ginet has correctly interpreted Wittgenstein, there are several difficulties with the argument against private rules.

Ginet partially anticipates the first difficulty:

It is important that the specifications of (a) [what counts as a person making a fully informed judgment that a particular act conforms to a particular rule] and (b) [who counts as an actual and potential user of a particular rule] be such that it does not follow trivially from the definition of their terms that the informed judgment of actual and potential users is correct. Otherwise, there would not be specified a genuine (informative) criterion — a sort of fact that, necessarily, constitutes an act's conforming (or not) to a rule — but just a useless tautology.

There is, of course, equal danger that one produce an outright falsehood instead of a 'genuine criterion'.

If (I) is to be true, there must be a specification of what counts as a fully informed judgment that an act accords with a rule which insures