

*Working Paper*

**Where the River Meets the Sea:  
Wittgenstein and the Context of Rationality**

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## Abstract

The works of Ludwig Wittgenstein are famous for many terms and ideas: language games, private language, rules and rule-following, are widely known beyond the borders of philosophy. However, rationality as a central concept in occidental philosophy never seemed to have sparked Wittgenstein's interest. At least, the term does not explicitly show up in his works. Does this in fact mean that he did not have a notion of rationality? Is it really the case that Wittgenstein simply missed out on one of the most important concepts of philosophical thought? On the contrary: not only did he deal with questions definitively ascribed to the conceptual history of the term, but he also worked towards a transformation of the notion of human rationality and its philosophical applications. Wittgenstein's efforts were aimed at showing that there is nothing within human nature that defines what is perceived as rational, irrational or non-rational, but that the differences are produced in human action and language. Put another way, there are no fixed and timeless criteria of rationality that we can ever explore. The necessity of such a transformative perspective on rationality, however, can only be adequately captured and appreciated by recognizing the taxonomy of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, and the systematic arrangement of some of his best-known concepts. It will be argued that this systematic arrangement has to be completed by another concept that fits in between form of life and language: the *context*. It is only here that rationality can be properly addressed.

## 1. Introduction

The works of Ludwig Wittgenstein are famous for many terms and ideas: language games, private language, rules and rule-following, are widely known beyond the borders of philosophy. However, rationality as a central concept in occidental philosophy never seemed to have sparked Wittgenstein's interest. At least, the term does not explicitly show up in his works. Does this in fact mean that he did not have a notion of rationality? Is it really the case that Wittgenstein simply missed out on one of the most important concepts of philosophical thought?

On the contrary: not only did he deal with questions definitively ascribed to the conceptual history of the term, but he also worked towards a transformation of the notion of human rationality and its philosophical applications. Wittgenstein's efforts were aimed at showing that there is nothing within human nature that defines what is perceived as rational, irrational or non-rational, but that the differences are produced in human action and language. Put another way, there are no fixed and timeless criteria of rationality that we can ever explore. The solution to the question of "what is rationality?" cannot be found in what Wittgenstein called the "facts of nature," but only in the shared knowledge of meaningful linguistic action. The necessity of such a transformative perspective on rationality, however, can only be adequately captured and appreciated by recognizing the taxonomy of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, and the systematic arrangement of some of his best-known concepts.

The most pressing question may be: why does Wittgenstein not simply use the term "rationality" in his works, if he worked towards a transformation of the concept? To answer this question it is useful to start from the literal meaning of the word (orig. lat.: *ratio*), which can be translated in at least two distinct ways. First, the term could be interpreted as the human ability of computation, reckoning, reasoning, and judgment. In this version, emphasis is placed on the human intellect, or cognitive talent. If somebody thinks or acts rationally, his or her reasoning and action is based on measures of utility, appropriateness, or efficiency. "Rational" in this sense is the mere calculation of different means of reaching certain ends or goals. In the second translation, rationality goes beyond this notion to encompass the human capability of reason, insight, and gaining knowledge, which, at the same time, implies a normative justification of action. Rational action in this translation is not just based on certain intellectual capacities, but can also be justified by imparting good reason to others. "To accept something as rational is to accept it as making sense, as

appropriate, or required, or in accordance with some acknowledged goal, such as aiming at truth or aiming at the good,” as Blackburn puts it.<sup>1</sup>

The problem that shows up here, which probably kept Wittgenstein from using the term explicitly, is the timelessness and universality that both translations implicate. To talk of rationality is to talk about some kind of cause-and-effect chain with roots in the natural preconditions of the mind and reason. Wittgenstein was very skeptical about such a fixed, linear, trivial and deterministic notion of rationality. His point was that questions interrelated with what was then called “rationality” by philosophers, cannot be addressed as “facts of nature,” but occur first and only within a space of language and action. “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language,” he says.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it is only here – in language – where issues of rationality can be addressed by philosophy. This also means that rationality cannot be explained from the viewpoint of the exterior, but can only be understood from within a certain space of linguistic expressions and their regular use. Therefore, the task of philosophy and social sciences cannot be to explore *the* human rationality, but to generate knowledge about *a* rationality that always varies.

The aim of this article is not to announce that the idea of rationality is obsolete, or should be deconstructed. Rather, it is to show how rationality must be re-thought to save the concept. What Wittgenstein’s works offer us is a local and temporal, variable notion of rationality, not the knowledge of a timeless and enduring constant. Still, this will turn out to be a far more accurate analysis than deterministic and trivial models of rationality can ever provide.

To start the quest for rationality, it is first necessary to find a point of reference. Natural sciences, on one hand, and social science, on the other, seem to be most promising in this regard. On closer inspection, however, there appear fundamental misunderstandings and misapprehensions in both scientific traditions. I suggest that the core of the problem lies in the deterministic, simplified and therefore distracting notion of rationality to which they contribute. Wittgenstein foresaw these problems and worked towards a transformation of the term by instead using *facts of nature*, *form(s) of life*, *language*, *language games* and *rules* to deal with the same problems and questions. Second, I will illustrate how these concepts taken together systematically form the basis for a much more differentiated picture of the idea of rationality. Finally, it will be argued that this systematic arrangement has to be completed by another concept that fits in between *form of life* and *language*: the *context*. It is only here, I argue, that rationality can be properly addressed.

## 2. The Search for the Foundations of Rationality in Science

Although natural and social sciences have different approaches to the history of rationality, they converge at a crucial point: both traditions abstain from any attempt to substantially examine the meaning of the concept. Rationality is viewed from the exterior by a mere observation of inputs and outputs that are assigned to the term *ex post facto*. This superficial and obscuring project, however, has nothing to do with the idea of rationality itself.

### *Natural Science*

In the last few years, rapid developments in natural science, especially in neuroscience, seem to have put the decoding of the human mind and the exploration of a “formula of rationality” within reach. Though, the knowledge that science can produce about the foundations of rationality is naturally very limited.

Brain research already allows us to map language, thoughts, ideas, pictures, memories, and emotions within different parts of the brain, enabling us understand how it functions.<sup>3</sup> Scientific literature offers explanations of how the neuronal patterns of the inner world can be measured and assigned to certain objects in the outer world. For instance, by referring to these patterns one can ascertain that somebody is thinking of a certain object, e.g. an elephant, a tree, or a table. So, would it not be tenable to claim that there is a neuronal pattern that distinguishes the rational from non-rational or irrational thinking? Would it not be conceivable that one day science could explore the module of rationality in the brain? And, would this identification of the physical manifestation in synaptic networks not be the same as the knowledge about the scientific object, or the process of recognition? Is it not possible to explain rationality by discovering the foundations of the way it is coded in the brain?

Wittgenstein denies the direct correspondence between reality and the human perception of facts, which must for him be established by means of language. “The only correlate in language to an intrinsic necessity is an arbitrary rule,” he says.<sup>4</sup> There is indeed good reason to be skeptical about such a predetermined link between fact and meaning. For the knowledge that can be derived from science is very limited. The cartography of mind merely lets us comprehend how information is encoded; no more and no less. About the information itself – its content, its practical correlates and meanings – science can tell us nothing.

Merely pointing to observable neuronal appearances that coincide with a certain perception can never help us to understand *why* and *for what reason* an elephant, a tree or a table is perceived as such, or why something is recognized as rational. To know that somebody is thinking of some kind of object is not synonymous with knowing about it in a substantial way. The same is true for an abstract concept like rationality. The ability to recognize that one perceives something as rational, or even that one thinks in a rational way, has nothing to do with the knowledge of rationality itself, and cannot answer the crucial questions “what is rationality?” and “how do we know about it?”

The point is that we must already know what we are searching for to be able to find its physical correlate in the brain. The knowledge of rationality must precede its theoretical detection through the observation of neuronal networks and patterns. Put another way, someone who has never heard of an elephant, a table, or a tree and was not taught the differences between these will not be able to distinguish or even recognize these things. The same must be said about rationality: the scientific re-cognition of rationality already presupposes its cognition. Therefore, if one day we really are able to explore a certain neuronal pattern correlated with rational thought and behavior, we will only be pointing back to ourselves and our way of assigning meaning to the world. It will be a mere look into the mirror of perception, but not an explanation of the picture itself. The notion of rationality must precede every scientific endeavor, and therefore, remain the missing link of the natural sciences.

### *Social Science*

The concerns of social sciences would seem to be more promising. Since they focus on inter-subjective meaning more than the natural and physical foundations of human behavior, they should be able to discern more about the *meaning* of rationality. Nevertheless, in social science research, rationality remains a shimmering, equally blurry concept: actors, action, and processes are described as rational whenever there is no better explanation for them. In other words: if it can be claimed that certain individuals, groups, or institutions act rationally, then no further explanations are possible or necessary. Where rationality begins, explanations come to an end. What is hidden behind the concept remains obscure. Particularly in economics and social science research, the notion of rationality has more and more become an empty phrase used as a wildcard by assigning it *ex post facto* to actors, and adjusting its meaning to meet the subject of explanation, i.e., the action. Here,

the term normally stands for not much more than purposeful, interest-driven, and benefit-maximizing reasoning and action.

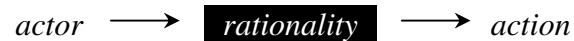
In reality, this definition tells us nothing about rationality and therefore holds little scientific value. This is because to talk of action (whether rational, irrational, or non-rational), there must be, by definition, some kind of goal to achieve. Every actor must be able to give reasons for his action. If there is no reason for doing something it may be misleading to speak of action at all, but rather of mere (unconscious, non-reasoned) conduct or behavior. For example, if somebody wants to get from A to B in the fastest possible way, he or she will make a detour through C only if there is a reason for doing so. If there is no reason for going through C before continuing on to B, it seems more suitable to speak of a behavior (with a cause), rather than of an action (with a reason). And if there is indeed a reason for taking the roundabout way, this does not automatically mean it is a rational one. It is conceivable, for instance, that a request, a command, or an intuition is behind the action, or that somebody acts in this or that way because he or she has always done so out of habit, and not as the result of rational calculation. Sometimes we go to achieve a goal, sometimes the path is the goal, and sometimes we walk a path without even knowing the goal. However, this does not say anything about the rationality of action or the actor.

Apart from this conceptual fuzziness, an even more fundamental problem emerges from contemporary social science. Rationality is assumed to be a universal, timeless, and self-referential dimension given to us by nature. Rationality in this dominant conception is a generalized and immutable function determining the output of reasoning or action. It persists as a constant kind of formula or mechanism, even though the actors preoccupied by rationality change. This notion of rationality possesses all the features of what Heinz von Foerster once described as a “trivial machine:”

A trivial machine is characterized by a one-to-one relationship between its “input” (stimulus, cause) and its “output” (response, effect). This invariable relationship is “the machine.” Since this relationship is determined once and for all, this is a deterministic system; and since an output once observed for a given input will be the same for the same input given later, this is also a predictable system.<sup>5</sup>

Like von Foersters’ trivial machine, where the relationship between input and output is determined “once and for all,” rationality seems to produce outputs that are dependent on some kind of inevitable, nature-given mechanism underlying rationality. In this kind of “trivial rationalistic”

understanding, different actors – acting in different historical contexts and different institutional surroundings – all share the same predetermined reasoning. Rationality is perceived as a linear function that somehow connects rational actor and rational action:



Therefore, thinking and doing not only become explainable, but also predictable and foreseeable by rationality.

At the same time, and this should cast severe doubt on such “trivial rationalism,” the underlying mechanism remains an analytical black box. The function and content of what is perceived as “rational” is described only by referring to the way it transforms inputs to outputs, without considering the processes happening in the interior. Rationality seems to be some kind of magical device that transforms every input to a certain output through a mechanism that, as per this definition, we cannot explore. We know that there is something like rationality, we can say when an actor acts and does not act rationally, but we cannot explain why or how we come to this conclusion.

Wittgenstein had severe reservations about such a deterministic and simplifying notion of rationality. The objective of his philosophical endeavors was to show how improper and false the picture of a universal, calculating – and therefore calculable – mind, or a natural capacity for gaining reason and knowledge, actually is. His aim was to open the black box and to transform the notion of rationality to a localized, temporal, and variable concept that can only be adequately understood by means of language.

### **3. The Place of Rationality in Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Language**

How can a look at Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language help us to arrive at a deeper understanding of rationality that is neither geared toward the physical foundations of mind, nor constitutes a one-sided and simplifying causal mechanism? To illustrate this, one should first become aware of the system that underlies Wittgenstein’s work, which manifests in his differentiation of *facts of nature*, *form of life*, *language*, *language games*, and *rules*.



### *Facts of Nature, Form of Life, and Language*

Despite some differences in interpretation, it seems indisputable that the natural foundations of the human mind and language do indeed have a place in Wittgenstein's philosophy. But there is also unanimous agreement that what he called "facts of nature" have never played a central part in his philosophy. Instead, these are only a very broad framework enabling, but not predetermining, the actual formation of definitions and meaning within language. This is very clear in the following passage from *Philosophical Investigations*:

If the formation of concepts can be explained by facts of nature, should we not be interested, not in grammar, but rather in that in nature which is the basis of grammar? – Our interest certainly includes the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature. [...] But our interest does not fall back upon these possible causes of the formation of concepts; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history – since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes.<sup>6</sup>

Even if one can assume that facts of nature constitute a certain basis, they are not a blueprint of what is built on this foundation. Wittgenstein, therefore, did not devote much effort to the natural basis of human language and understanding, but focused on how these phenomena are generated within social boundaries.

The term "form(s) of life"<sup>7</sup> seems to be quite similar to the facts of nature at first glance, but has to be carefully distinguished. Wittgenstein says: "What has to be accepted, the given, is ... forms of life."<sup>8</sup> But, this does not mean that forms of life have their foundation in human preconditions, or are predetermined by nature. Rather, it is "the intertwining of culture, world-view and language" that constitutes a form of life and makes it the non-transcendable basis for the development of language and language games.<sup>9</sup> The difference between forms of life and facts of nature is particularly evident in Wittgenstein's well-known and often cited lion example: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him."<sup>10</sup> The reason for this impossibility of understanding lies in the connection between speech and action. The point of this peculiar example is that even if lions had actually developed a language comparable in complexity to human language, they would not automatically think and act like humans.<sup>11</sup> Understanding and communication between the two mammalian groups would be impossible due to totally different natural histories, which imply different actions and a completely different way of life (not form of life!). Ergo, even if the lion could speak our language, i.e., employ our vocabulary and grammar, he would use it in a completely

different way. In contrast, forms of life have emerged over the course of time and in accordance with language, or more concretely, the unity of language and action, and could, therefore, be characterized as *language-practical* systems.

Language, in turn, is not merely the human ability to make use of linguistic interaction, nor the aptitude for highly complex communication, but a multitude and sum of language games with rules that have evolved by practice *within* a form of life. Keep in mind that “the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, a form of life has to be understood as a specific space in which language can arise by means of regularities in, both, communication *and* action. The fact that Wittgenstein speaks of a *form of life* and not, for example, a *purpose in life* already has a clear practical and outward-facing connotation. Hence, forms of life stabilize the meaning of language through consensus of its use. They are spaces of the “comfortable certainty, not the certainty that is still struggling.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, in forms of life explanations, reasons and justifications come to an end and certainty (not knowledge!) begins.

To illustrate this interplay between “comfortable certainty” and one that is “still struggling,” Wittgenstein employs the very vivid metaphor of a river.<sup>14</sup> Although the river-bed guides the river, over time, the constant flow of the river will reshape the bed: sediments are eroded and deposited to create a new river. We can conceptualize the form of life as a river-bed, and the river as the living language. Therefore, the form of life provides a solid, socially or cultural established framework for language, while at the same time it is renewed and reshaped by the constant use of language. In other words: language is determined by its underlying form of life, which simultaneously reproduces and develops it.<sup>15</sup>

The variability of a form of life that find expression in the river-metaphor has two aspects. First, it varies in a *temporal* way; over time the banks of the river will move, and new languages will form and old ones will be transformed. The language within a form of life is the object of permanent and inevitable change. Language is living because it has to be used to be meaningful, and because things outside the language are also changing. The meaning of language is constituted by its practical use, but also and necessarily changed by it. Second, forms of life are *locally* distinguishable in that they are spaces of particular linguistic practices. This does not necessarily preclude the possibility of learning and understanding between different forms of life that can be understood as cultural, social, short, language-practical systems. Rather, it means that a form of life, understood as such a system, can always be interpreted from the viewpoint of another form of life – but only via its

own unquestionable and non-transcendable reasons. “The common behavior ... is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language [and a form of life, A.G.]”.<sup>16</sup> So, even the possibility of learning and understanding is one that has to be derived from the perspective of a certain (i.e. temporal and locally distinct) form of life, and is based on the knowledge, or rather, the certainty of this space.<sup>17</sup> Explicitly, no normative dimension is addressed here, merely a descriptive and language-logical one. For Wittgenstein, the possibility of understanding is always very practical, and not abstract-normative. For him there is no ideal language, and – this is it necessarily included – there is no ideal thought and action that could result in a fixed rationality that inevitably guides our actions.

### *Language Games and Rules*

In contrast to facts of nature and form(s) of life, language games are extremely flexible and diverse. They differ from each other in many ways – for example, in sophistication, complexity, scope, and reach. This makes it difficult to define the term precisely. Wittgenstein himself preferred to present and develop his best-known and most important concept with numerous examples, rather than giving an exhaustive definition. But it is probably this consistent incompleteness that best characterizes the language game. In order to approach this difficult idea, one has to remember that meaning, in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, is always defined by the regular use of linguistic expressions. The language game is an environment that provides more or less clear rules about how linguistic expressions and their usage are linked.

This also implies that meaning and meaningful action is relative. While a phrase or action in a particular language game might have a fixed meaning, the same phrase or action can stand for something completely different in another. This applies not only to names of objects, but also to terms such as “beautiful,” “old,” “good,” “fair,” and also “rational” or “reasonable” and for the patterns of behavior we assign to these. They are all defined through a very specific use in a specific, language-mediated social space, which is always a space of regular, interrelated linguistic activity. As such, there are neither right nor wrong definitions, but only those that fit into a particular language game or do not.<sup>18</sup>

Language and action are linked to each other and are interdependent. The “how” of action, though, can only be discovered within the limits of language games and by analyzing the relationship between language and action. The linguistic expressions within the framework of a

game are subject to more or less profound transformative processes over the course of time – similar to the transformation of forms of life, but much faster. Just as action has to adapt new circumstances, so does language have to adjust. “When language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change.”<sup>19</sup> Against this background it is clear that rationality cannot carry any fixed meaning – at least not if it occurs as part of a language game. The use of the term must here be subject to permanent change, which also means that what is called “rationality” differs over time. Consequently, on a conceptual level, there can never be such a thing as an enduring identification of rationality with itself.

But it is not just openness and variability that characterize language games. Language games are, on the contrary and above all, sites of regularities. More precisely, they contain regularities in the combination of linguistic expressions and action that are synonymous with the rules governing any game.<sup>20</sup> An important feature of language is thus the repeatability made possible through the application of specific rules.<sup>21</sup> The rule concept, as a result, goes beyond the constitution of simple word meanings in the language game. It concerns actions, or reasoning about the possible options for action, and is therefore, in its function close to the original meaning of the word “rationality.”

As in the case of the language game, Wittgenstein refrains from giving a final definition of rules. Instead, he develops this multifaceted concept using various exemplary demonstrations. A first definition of the Wittgensteinian rule is found in Bix:

Wittgenstein’s use of “rule” refers to all normative constraints which apply over an indefinite variety of cases, to practices where our actions might be said to be guided, to situations where characterizing actions as “correct” or “incorrect” makes sense.”<sup>22</sup>

All of these cases noted by Bix happen within certain language games as part of a particular linguistic practice. At the same time, rules can be seen as normative guidelines for a specific language game. Here an interesting parallel to rationality exists: if one can say that an action is rational, it is always possible to legitimize the action by providing justifying and legitimizing reasons behind it. But which reasons are “good” or “convincing” enough to be used defensively, or for justification? This question can be clarified only within the regularities and rules of a language game. One could say: the rational agent follows a rule. Which rule this is remains to be seen – it cannot be fixed by decision or definition. So, what differentiates rule-following from other operations and activities? And to what extent do rules govern our actions? These questions lead to

new, *linguistic* demands on the concept of rationality. One might as well ask: what is rational behavior, and when can our actions be considered rational? Or, what rules apply to the discussion of rationality?

Empirically, neither the correspondence of a number of actions with one another, nor the commitment to a particular rule, nor the mere certainty of following a rule is a valid proof of the fact that a rule is actually being followed. For there is always the possibility that one has misunderstood the rule or simply believes he or she is following the rule, while not actually not doing so. “[T]o *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately:’ otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.”<sup>23</sup> A decisive fact in the operation of following a rule is that the one following it is able to give reasons for his or her action. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that he or she is aware of the underlying rules at all times. Quite the opposite: in practice, this case seems to be the exception. Yet, it is important that one can refer to a rule if in doubt. For example: “I translate the text in this or that way, because I follow these particular grammatical rules,” “I complete the sequence of numbers according to the rules of logic,” or “I sort these things by color!”

In contrast to this language-practical notion, no further justification can be given for causally determined processes. The cause is already the whole explanation! To say rationality is the cause for something does not allow for any clarification other than this, and nothing else, is the case. Like divine inspiration, the causality of action is a conversation-ender. Wittgenstein’s claim, “I shall not be able to teach anyone else my ‘technique’ of following the line” applies to both.<sup>24</sup> If the causes of behavior are always something fixed, then there is some kind of causal mechanism afoot and the actor is effectively passive. For example, there is a cause for a stone falling to the ground when you let it go, or someone crying out in pain when the stone hits his foot. This, however, is not true for rule-following, which requires knowledge and internalization of a rule. Humans think, act, and live according to rules; and yet these have no causal character. “If an agent follows a rule in  $\Phi$ ing, the rule must be part of his reason for  $\Phi$ ing, and not just a cause,” says Glock.<sup>25</sup> While a cause either takes effect or does not, a rule opens up at least two options for the agent to exercise his or her subjectivity: either he follows the rule or he goes against it. Thus, responsibility for an action is established, because the decision for or against a particular rule is neither a predetermined causality, nor is it arbitrary. Following a rule always implicates the faculty of reasoning and, with some reservations, the justifiability of action.

The more that people live their lives in different and sometimes competing language game-frameworks, the more there seems to be competition and conflict between different language games and their rules. One person can, for example, be employer, consumer, environmentalist, father of a family, voter, etc.. Not infrequently in daily life, rules from different language games clash with each other and lead to tensions. Against this background, it becomes clear that following rules can never be something unitary, predetermined, and mechanical in its execution. Rule-following, according to Wittgenstein, is an ongoing process of interpretation, application, and re-creation of the rules; never a mere implementation of the rules of conduct. It is the mutual dependence of creating and obeying rules that characterizes Wittgenstein's argument, and calls for transforming the concept of rationality from a focus on causality to one of linguistic variability.

#### **4. The Context of Rationality**

On closer inspection, it appears that there is a gap between the form of life, as a first and basic level of understanding, and specific and concrete meaning on the level of language and language games. What is missing is a distinction between different language games, and groups of language games. The question is how language games are distinguishable from one another, although some may be very similar. More precisely: if one perceives language as a "collection of language games," then we should ask what overarching structure is able to provide a framework that facilitates this play of inter-subjective meaning.<sup>26</sup> The question is, in which *context* do language games and rules gain their unequivocal and generally known significance?

Although language games such as ordering, requesting, or guessing are not identical to each other, they point to something that Wittgenstein aptly calls "family resemblances."<sup>27</sup> Language could, in fact, be interpreted as a multitude of language games, which are characterized by a number of similarities as well as differences. On the one hand, there are general similarities between them, just as in normal games (like ball games, board games, card games, gambling, etc.).<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, they differ in their rules. First and foremost, there is a difference in their embeddedness, so that a "move" in one particular (language) game can be meaningful and understandable, while meaningless or non-understandable in a different environment.<sup>29</sup> For instance, making up a story or singing a song in scientific circles – in which it is the aim to formulate methodological and empirically established hypotheses that are logical, coherent and consistent – would encounter either

a lack of understanding, or a complete rejection as a totally unacceptable move within the boundaries of science. Even military commands or a guessing game would be likely to cause surprise. Only by being embedded in their environments, and through their situational assignments, do language games maintain their content and effectiveness. It is a certain recognizable and commonly known framework of meaning that gives language games their specific, unique, and unambiguous meanings.

For this framework that gives the language game meaning and sets up a particular language – understood as the sum of the games included – I would like to propose the term *context*. The concept of context fits in between form of life and language, resulting in a comprehensive and closed system that can be depicted as follows:

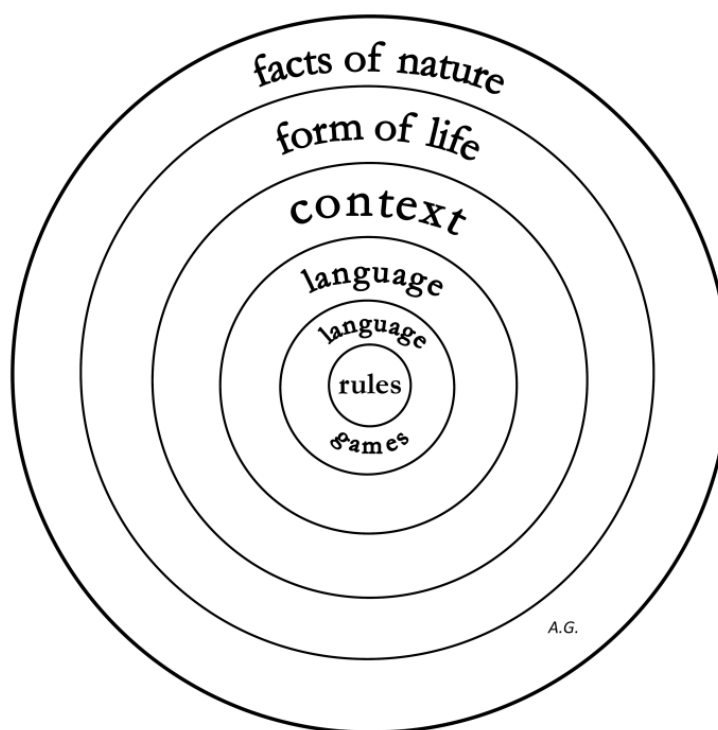


Figure 1. The context of rationality

The outermost layer builds the facts of nature, which Wittgenstein never saw as significant, and which will not be examined here in more detail. The context is enclosed by a form of life and, at the same time, determines a specific language, or a specific linguistic area of action. To put it

another way: the context makes possible the meaningful assignment of language and practice. It also encloses the numerous and diverse language games and the rules contained therein; in short, the language of a context. From this perspective, it is not surprising that “family resemblances” exist between different language games, because the simultaneous knowledge of different contexts leads to the possibility of sharing and learning amongst these. It is even likely that certain language games from one context are adapted (not adopted!) in another over time, or that two contexts develop simultaneously. As a result, similar (never the same) rules will be employed in different contexts to perceive reality and produce meaning. Despite family resemblances, the judge delivers a judgment instead of issuing a command, and a scientific calculation is usually focused on a different goal than an economic one. Although both contexts contain similar rules and include language games with strong family resemblances, both are different from each other and discrete.

Here, at the level of context, the question of the location and characteristics of rationality – understood as the ability to calculate alternative actions, but also the capacity of inter-subjective reasoning and justification – can now be addressed. Wittgenstein makes it clear that language cannot have emerged from some kind of ratiocination.<sup>30</sup> So, to speak of rationality or rational action, we have to move to the level of language and cannot stick to the levels of facts of nature or forms of life, with their implications of a generally un-transcendable factuality. It is only through language that more complex cognitive processes are enabled, e.g., the formulation of abstract conditional clauses, or setting values and goals, or the development of rules. Rationality is to be regarded as a part of language. It is inherent in language, and does not precede or surpass it.

The context level gives language its commonly known and accepted framework. It enables the identification of linguistic practices and provides a basis for understanding these, but does not necessarily cause or predetermine categorical agreement with them. A context is thus a space of possibility. It is not just an area of understanding, but also a place that enables meaningful action, and the statement of justification for this action. It supplies the agent with specific reasons for action, without totally taking him in or monopolizing his action. Although the use of reasons is also provided by the form of life, there is no conscious use of the reasons or rules for action on that level. Here, one could only say: “This is how I do it” or “That’s it!” Or: “Any ‘reasonable’ person behaves like this,” as Wittgenstein says.<sup>31</sup> Here the unfounded belief is quickly reached, based on the founded belief.<sup>32</sup>



This assurance is not to be confused with the language-practical reasoning that first and exclusively occurs within a context. In a context, language, language games, and, above all, rules can be used reflexively. It is the level of the (rational) freedom of action. That is, because one can eventually recognize that you play a particular language game; one can decide whether to play the game or not; one can also expect that others play the same language game or at least know the rules; and one can finally (voluntarily) decide whether or not, and to what extent, one is willing to follow the rules of the game. Additionally, language games are not entirely surrounded and defined by clear and self-enforcing rules. “A rule stands there like a sign-post. – Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go?” asks Wittgenstein. Does it always lead only one way? A sign-post “sometimes leaves room for doubt and sometimes not.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, there is always room, or even freedom, for action.

These are crucial features of a rationality that can only arise at the level of context, and is not established in the facts of nature or forms of life. What is obtained on the context level is the tie to a practical, language-specific, contextual rationality, instead of a rationality that implies an isolated independence in action or behavior. This opens up new avenues of freedom for action, together and in accordance with the other participants in “language games.” This perspective might seem unsatisfactory at first sight, since this is all we can ever achieve by the means of language that we are necessarily bound to. At second glance, it offers a view of rationality that leaves room for free action despite rationality, or better, through rationality. In this perspective, a context of rationality never just contains action. It makes action first and foremost conceivable, and possible.

Although, a context is a genuine space of reasoning and action it is, at the same time, also the origin of new, practical, linguistic criteria of rationality. This distinguishes it from its nature-given frame and the foundation constituted by a form of life, both of which are not, or at least not consciously, changeable. In contrast, the characteristic of rule-following, which is localized within language games, is that it is not an inevitable activity. When Wittgenstein speaks of rules he means an actual regularity and repeatability, not just the bare existence of formal norms. It is necessary for rules as well as linguistic expressions to be woven into activities, in order to maintain their meaning and to be understandable. “Our rules leave loopholes open, and the practice has to speak for itself,” says Wittgenstein.<sup>34</sup> It would be wrong, though, to suppose that behind Wittgenstein’s rule-concept lies a set of fixed directives that predetermine people’s actions, make them predictable, and therefore could be studied like an instruction manual. Although rule-guided action is an expression of a social

institution and, as such, somewhat calculable and reliable, it is also a means of voluntary and individual self-determination.<sup>35</sup> The inevitable decidedness, “the given,” is a feature of forms of life and language itself, but not of the language game and its changing contents.

Following a rule is not arbitrary, or better said, it must not be arbitrary. If rule-following relied purely on private considerations and independent decisions, a rule would mean nothing – it could possess *any* content. It would be arbitrary, because everybody (and with good reason) could interpret it differently. In its strictest sense, it would be no longer a rule.<sup>36</sup> Rules necessarily require a social context to make them significant; a context whose medium or vehicle of perception and expression is language.

	<b>Rule</b>	<b>Effect</b>
<b>Rational action</b>	Action is based on a rule from the current context	Action is understandable, justifiable and is regarded as rational
<b>Non-rational / Irrational action</b>	Action is based on no rule, on an unknown rule, or on a rule from another than the current context	Action is not understandable or justifiable and is not considered rational

Figure 2: The context-dependency of rationality

Now there is also the possibility of rules from other social contexts or institutions becoming the basis for decisions about actions. For example, one could judge a painting by the rules of geometry, or one could try to answer legal questions by the rules of expediency and self-interest. In these cases three possible consequences arise; (1) the action would not be understandable by others, (2) it would be recognized as a context-external action and rejected on this basis, or (3) it would, in extreme cases, be classified as insane.<sup>37</sup> In all three cases, the action would be perceived as irrational or even non-rational, and could not gain any inter-subjective recognition.<sup>38</sup> To be seen as a rational action, therefore, two conditions must be met: first, actions must be understandable and to that

extent justifiable.<sup>39</sup> There must be an underlying constant known within the boundaries of the context. Second, the underlying rule must be one of the current context, or it must refer to it.

Rationality in its linguistic reformulation is mostly a social term referring to a specific context of meaning and opening up room for action. Wittgenstein says: “To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.”<sup>40</sup> The same applies to a form of linguistic rationality: it is a technique one can master without being ruled by it.<sup>41</sup> There is no unavoidable force inherent in rule-following; rather, a linguistic rationality helps to coordinate and structure action. It enables action. The range of such a rationality is necessarily limited to a specific social context, as a space of language-practical options and perspectives.

## **5. Conclusion**

The prospect of a reformulation of rationality is thus defined: it is necessary to discover a particular context and its language – which may in Wittgenstein only be the unity of language and action – in order to track down rationality. More precisely, the task is finding and understanding the practical-linguistic rules of a language game that is embedded in a certain context. If we assume also that these are the rules governing the possibility of inter-subjective claiming and justifying, we come very close to the above-mentioned double meaning of the Latin word “ratio.” Rational action, then, means not only the calculation of costs and benefits in relation to a specific goal or similar operations, but also the normative justification of statements or actions as reasonable, and therefore acceptable. In other words, if one can say of an actor that he acts rationally, this is not just an explanation for his actions, but also and always a reason and justification for it.<sup>42</sup> Or, as Hollis once put it, “Rational action is its own explanation.”<sup>43</sup>

Yet, there is a crucial difference in the non-linguistic concepts of rationality: in its practical-linguistic reformulation the term may not be causally determined, nor can it be a universalistic and timeless constant. In reality, it is extremely variable. This variability does not have to result in a general instability or irrationality of action, but should be understood as an opportunity. This is because it allows its own continual development and adaptation, and thus opens up new prospects of thinking and action.

In a way, the prospect of a linguistic and contextual rationality is a very optimistic: after all, in a practical-linguistic sense it must always be an expression of voluntary decision-making – beyond natural or cultural determination, or a trivial, mechanistic and linear concept of rationality. Freedom of action and self-determination would be possible *due to* rationality and not *in spite of* it. No one has depicted this principle more beautifully and vividly than Laozi, about 2,500 years ago:

Thirty spokes unite in one nave:  
and on that which is non-existent  
depends the wheel's utility.  
Clay is moulded into a vessel:  
and on that which is non-existent  
depends the vessel's utility.  
By cutting out doors and windows  
we build a house:  
and on that which is non-existent  
depends the house's utility.

(Laozi, Tao Teh King)

Rationality can never be more than a frame, the contents of which always have to be filled and determined anew. This task, however, does not lie within rationality itself, but is just enabled through it. Or, to stick to Wittgenstein's metaphor: Rationality begins where the river meets the sea.

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<sup>1</sup> "Rationality," *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Simon Blackburn. Oxford University Press, 2008. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. Harvard University Library. 20 March 2010  
<<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t98.e2637>>

<sup>2</sup> PI: §109

<sup>3</sup> *Der Spiegel*, 14/2008, 31.03.2008: pp. 132 et seqq..

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. In the following abbr. PI, § 372.

<sup>5</sup> Foerster, H. v. 2003. "Perception of the Future and the Future of Perception." In Foerster, H. von (ed.) *Understanding Understanding: Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition*. New York: Springer, p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> PI II: 578

<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein uses the term in the singular and plural.

<sup>8</sup> PI II: p. 226, BPP: § 630

<sup>9</sup> Glock, H.-J. 1996. *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> PI II: p. 223.

<sup>11</sup> PI: §§ 25, 415; PI II: p. 230.

<sup>12</sup> PI: §23.

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- <sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1974. *On Certainty. Reprinted with corrections and indices*. Edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Translated by Danis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. In the following abbr. OC, §§ 357 et seq.
- <sup>14</sup> OC: §§ 96 et seqq.
- <sup>15</sup> OC: § 156
- <sup>16</sup> PI: § 206
- <sup>17</sup> PI: § 54, 81
- <sup>18</sup> cf. Glock, H.-J. 1996. *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 324.
- <sup>19</sup> OC: § 65
- <sup>20</sup> There are boundaries that surround a particular language game and make it distinguishable from other language games.
- <sup>21</sup> cf. Savigny, E. v. 1995. „Bedeutung, Sprachspiel, Lebensform.“ In: Apel, K.-O et al. (ed.) *Wittgenstein Studies 2*. New York, 20 March 2010 <<http://sammelpunkt.philo.at:8080/456/>>.
- <sup>22</sup> Bix, B. 1992: “The Application (and Mis-Application) of Wittgenstein's Rule-Following Considerations to Legal Theory.” In Patterson, D. (ed.) *Wittgenstein and Legal Theory*. Boulder: Westview Press, p. 209.
- <sup>23</sup> PI: § 202
- <sup>24</sup> PI: § 232
- <sup>25</sup> Glock l.c. 1996: p. 325.
- <sup>26</sup> Grayling, A.-C. 2004. *Wittgenstein*. Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, p. 94.
- <sup>27</sup> PI: §§ 67, 77, 108, 164, 179, 236
- <sup>28</sup> PI: § 67
- <sup>29</sup> See also Winch, P. 1992. *Trying to Make Sense*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- <sup>30</sup> OC: § 475
- <sup>31</sup> OC: § 254
- <sup>32</sup> OC: § 253
- <sup>33</sup> PI: § 85
- <sup>34</sup> OC: § 139
- <sup>35</sup> cf. Bloor, D. 2002. *Wittgenstein: Rules and Institutions*. London: Routledge, p. 27, 79 et seqq..
- <sup>36</sup> Malcolm makes this very clear: “The point to be made here is that when one has given oneself the private rule, I will call this same thing ‘pain’ whenever it occurs,’ one is then free to do anything or nothing. That ‘rule’ does not point in any direction“ (Malcolm, N. 1968. “Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations.” In Pitcher, G. [ed.]: *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations*. London, p. 73).
- <sup>37</sup> The psychologist Erich Wulff has coined the term “the logic of insanity” in this connection. (Wulff, E. 2003. *Wahnsinnslogik: Von der Verstehbarkeit schizophrener Erfahrung*. Hamburg: Argument-Verlag, p. 150).
- <sup>38</sup> This does not preclude the incidental accordance of the rules of one context with those of another one.
- <sup>39</sup> The justifiability of action is not to be understood as synonymous with the inter-subjective acceptance of the justification.
- <sup>40</sup> PI: § 199
- <sup>41</sup> Vgl. Hollis, M. 1991. *Rationalität und soziales Verstehen: Wittgenstein-Vorlesungen der Universität Bayreuth*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, p. 59; idem. 1996. *Reason in Action: Essays in the Philosophy of Social Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 11 et seqq.
- <sup>42</sup> cf. Steinvoth, U. 2002. *Was ist Vernunft? Eine philosophische Einführung*. München: C.H. Beck, pp. 51, 18 et seqq..
- <sup>43</sup> Hollis, M. 1977. *Models of Man – Philosophical Thoughts on Social Action*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 20 et seq.