

Wittgenstein's conception of language

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A. *Language as a set of social practices*

Normative discourse is characterized by those features that are common to the language of morals, the language of aesthetic criticism, the language of politics, and all other languages in which we make and justify value judgments and prescriptions. Each of these languages I call a normative language, and it is the task of this chapter and the next to make clear what a normative language is. I shall use the concept of a normative language for further clarification of the concept of a point of view, which was introduced in Chapter 4. My claim is that *rules of relevance and rules of valid inference, which constitute the canons of reasoning that set the framework of a point of view, are the rules which govern our use of a normative language*. Thus different points of view are defined according to different normative languages, and *taking a certain point of view is deciding to use a certain normative language*. This decision will be shown to be a decision to engage in a certain social practice. In order to elucidate the concept of a normative language, it is first necessary to answer the question, What is a language? The philosopher who has made the most incisive and careful attempt to

answer this question is, in my opinion, Ludwig Wittgenstein. I therefore begin with a summary of the main points in Wittgenstein's investigations into the nature of language.

There are two basic characteristics of language that Wittgenstein emphasizes. These may be summed up in two statements. A language is a set of social practices. A language is a set of instruments. I shall discuss each characteristic in turn.

In Chapter 3 we saw that a social practice is defined by a set of rules and that a person's act cannot be described in terms of a social practice unless it is conceived as falling under the practice-defining rules. To say that a language is a set of social practices is to say that there are sets of rules specifying how certain acts shall be done in certain circumstances, and that a person cannot be said to be speaking a language (that is, uttering words *in* the language) unless his acts are done in accordance with the rules. A person may open his mouth and emit sounds, or take up his pen and make marks on paper, but these acts cannot be described as utterances in a language unless they are understood as falling under the rules which state how the language is to be used. This is so even if the sounds (or marks) which the person makes are, from a purely auditory (or visual) standpoint, just like the sounds we make when we say "It is raining" (or the marks we make when we write the same sentence).

This point is made by Wittgenstein whenever he compares languages with games, or whenever he speaks of, and constructs in his imagination, different "language games." A clear example of an act falling under a practice (and hence being describable in terms of a set of rules) is an act performed as part of the playing of a game. Wittgenstein puts it this way: "... A move in chess doesn't consist simply in moving a piece in such-and-such a way on the board . . . but in the circumstances that we call 'playing a game of chess,' solving a chess problem,' and so on." (L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. by G. E. M. Anscombe, p. 17e. Copyright 1953 by the Macmillan Company and used with their permission. Reprinted with permission, also, of Basil Blackwell, Oxford, England.) Such an act is comparable to making utterances in a language: "Can I say 'bububu' and mean 'If it doesn't rain I shall go for a walk'?"—It is only in a language that I can mean something

by something." (*Ibid.*, p. 18e, note.) Thus we cannot call anything a word or a sentence unless it is part of that kind of a rule-governed practice which we ordinarily call a language. A direct comparison between languages and games is made in the following passage:

We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm. . . . But we talk about it as we do about the pieces in chess when we are stating the rules of the game, not describing their physical properties.

The question "What is a word really?" is analogous to "What is a piece in chess?" (*Ibid.*, p. 47e.)

To know what a word is is to know what the practice is which makes it correct for us to call the emitting of a sound (or the writing of a mark) a word. And to know what the practice is is to know what the rules are which define it. Wittgenstein points out four basic characteristics of a practice-defining rule in his discussion of language. Since a language is a set of practices defined by rules, his analysis of these four characteristics of rules provides an elucidation of the concept of a language. The four characteristics may be stated as follows: (1) A practice-defining rule functions as a norm or criterion of conduct; it may be appealed to in judging whether something is done correctly or incorrectly. (2) The application of a practice-defining rule must in principle be intersubjectively knowable. (3) A practice-defining rule is always universal; it applies to a class of acts, never to a single act. (4) A practice-defining rule must be teachable, that is to say, it must be possible to train people to act in accordance with it. Let us see how Wittgenstein's account of each of these features of practice-defining rules helps to clarify what we mean by a language.

1. The difference between someone's merely manifesting a *regularity* in his behavior and his following a *rule* is this: only in the latter case does it make sense to ask, "Is he doing it correctly?" The pronoun "it" refers here to a certain kind of act or a certain way of acting which is specified by a rule. The question means "Is he following the rule or is he violating it?" To violate a rule is not merely to do something unusual or irregular, something which one does not ordinarily (i.e., "as a rule") do in a given set of circumstances. It is to make a mistake, to be at fault, to be subject to

correction. Thus we cannot learn how to engage in a practice simply by watching how others behave in certain circumstances. Their behavior must include the possibility of making a mistake and being corrected for it, and we must be able to recognize that a certain kind of act was a mistake, or a certain kind of treatment was corrected. This follows from the fact that a practice is rule-governed behavior. Wittgenstein points this out in the following way.

One learns the game by watching how others play. But we say that it is played according to such-and-such rules because an observer can read these rules off from the practice of the game—like a natural law governing the play.—But how does the observer distinguish in this case between players' mistakes and correct play?—There are characteristic signs of it in the players' behaviour. Think of the behaviour characteristic of correcting a slip of the tongue. It would be possible to recognize that someone was doing so even without knowing his language. (*Ibid.*, p. 27e.)

But this is not the only way to learn how to engage in a practice. We may learn by being taught the rules themselves. And to be taught a rule is to be taught what one is *supposed* to do in certain circumstances. The rule functions as a guide or regulator of correct (rule-obeying) behavior. "... We look to the rule for instruction and *do something*, without appealing to anything else for guidance." (*Ibid.*, p. 86e.)

That a rule can serve to guide us does not require that it tell us in *every* situation how we are supposed to act. Wittgenstein compares a rule to a signpost, to bring out this point. The signpost gives direction, but it is not the case that it leaves no doubt about where a person is to go after he has passed it.

A rule stands there like a sign-post.—Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it shew which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the foot-path or cross-country? (*Ibid.*, p. 39e.)

The rules defining the correct uses of a word in a language will specify clear-cut cases of correct usage and will allow us to infer clear-cut cases of incorrect usage, but there will always be a set of doubtful cases. These are often the cases which give rise to philosophical puzzlement and require philosophical "therapy." (*The*

Blue and Brown Books and Philosophical Investigations are full of examples of these.)

2. The analogy between a practice-defining rule and a signpost not only holds with regard to the fact that a rule acts as a criterion of correct behavior (still allowing for some doubtful cases); it also holds with regard to the fact that the application of a rule, at least in principle, must be intersubjectively knowable. Suppose there were no *convention* as to how a signpost is to be interpreted. Suppose each individual interpreted it in his own way, one reading the arrow as pointing in the direction from its tail to its head, another reading it as pointing in the opposite direction, another reading it as pointing in a line perpendicular to its axis, and so on. The signpost would not then have the capacity to function as a guide. It would not be a signpost at all. "... A person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom." (*Ibid.*, p. 80e. Sections 199-208 of Part I of *Philosophical Investigations* are especially concerned with this aspect of rules.)

This raises an important question. Does it mean that a person cannot play a game by himself, or cannot make up his own rules for a private game which he alone knows how to play? Does not a child set up his own practice-defining rule when he resolves not to step on any crack in the sidewalk on his way to school? The answer is that the intersubjective convention about how a rule is to be applied is a requirement only in principle. That is, it must be theoretically *possible* for more than one person to learn how to follow the rule. The rules of a private practice (as distinct from a social practice) are genuine rules because, though not publicly known, they are publicly knowable. Mr. Peter Winch has made this point clear in his excellent discussion of Wittgenstein's analysis of rules.

A mistake is a contravention of what is *established* as correct; as such, it must be *recognizable* as such a contravention. That is, if I make a mistake in, say, my use of a word, other people must be able to point it out to me. If this is not so, I can do what I like and there is no external check on what I do; that is, nothing is established. . . . It is, of course, possible, within a human society as we know it, with its established language and institutions, for an individual to adhere to a *private* rule of conduct. What Wittgenstein insists on, however, is, first, that it

must be in principle possible for other people to grasp that rule and judge when it is being correctly followed; secondly, that it makes no sense to suppose anyone capable of establishing a purely personal standard of behaviour if he had never had any experience of human society with its socially established rules. (P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan, 1958, Paul Ltd. and New York: The Humanities Press, pp. 32-33. The point is elaborated on pp. 33-39.)

The rules which govern the use of a language, then, must be such that it is possible for more than one person to know how to apply them and how to follow them. Otherwise the rules could not be said to have the capacity to regulate behavior and so could not be considered genuine rules at all. Thus this second feature of a practice-defining rule is necessary if the first feature is to hold. For if a rule lacked the capacity to regulate behavior it would also lack the capacity to function as a criterion or norm of correct behavior.

3. In a note on the meaning of the expression "to obey a rule" Wittgenstein says: "It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule." (*Op. cit.*, p. 81e.) A rule tells us to do an act of a certain kind (or to act in a certain way) in certain circumstances. If we know the rule we do not have to ask what we are supposed to do each time we find ourselves in those circumstances.

One does not feel that one has always got to wait upon the nod (the whisper) of the rule. On the contrary, we are not on tenterhooks about what it will tell us next, but it always tells us the same, and we do what it tells us. (*Ibid.*, p. 86e. See also Part I, Sections 237-238.)

Thus to be in the position of following (obeying) a rule is to be in the position of having our decisions guided by a universal principle of conduct.

In this light we see that a rule is necessarily general or universal. It must be applicable to a class of acts and it must apply to anyone who is an agent with regard to those acts. These features of a rule were pointed out in Section B of Chapter 7, where I discussed universal prescriptions and rules. I said there that the basic function of a rule is to regulate the conduct of people in general and that the statement of a rule is a statement that one is to do an act of a certain

kind in certain circumstances. The rule applies to anyone in those circumstances who can do the kind of act in question. No practice-defining rule, therefore, can be followed in only one instance by only one person, in the way that a particular prescription ("You ought to do X") could be fulfilled by a single act of an individual (namely, by the addressee's doing act X). Professor Bernard Mayo has argued that there is a point in saying that prescriptions guide behavior but rules regulate behavior:

Regulation suggests something which guidance does not, namely the application of a system of rules or principles. A guide may lead us to a destination which we should have failed to reach without him, but he may not employ any rules or principles. He may just know the country 'like the back of his hand'. . . . A morally untutored and untutored man could live an outwardly exemplary life if he were in constant touch with a moral adviser whose instructions [i.e., particular prescriptions] he implicitly obeyed; but he could not live a moral life. For he could not take any decisions in the light of moral principles; his actions are guided but not regulated. (B. Mayo, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.)

A rule, then, can regulate behavior only in so far as it is universal or general.

This feature of a rule is closely connected with the two features already discussed, as well as with the fourth feature to be discussed. In its function as a regulator of behavior (in Mayo's sense) a rule also serves as a criterion of correct behavior. A person behaves in-correctly or improperly when his particular acts are of the kind forbidden by a rule; when his acts are of the kind permitted or required by a rule, his conduct is correct. And the fact that a rule is universal gives point to the fact that its application must be publicly knowable. For a rule states that an act of a certain kind is to be done by anyone, whenever anyone is in a certain set of circumstances. Only one person may ever in fact be in those circumstances, but this does not deny the theoretical possibility of the rule's applying to the acts of anyone who may be in those circumstances. There would be no point in stating that an act is to be done by anyone in certain circumstances if there was only one person who could possibly know this.

4. The fourth characteristic of a practice-defining rule is brought to our attention by Wittgenstein in the following way. He first asks

us to imagine an unknown country where people *seem* to employ a language in carrying on the usual human activities. He then asks how we would go about finding out whether they did in fact have a language. How would we discover whether, in emitting sounds or making marks, they were doing such things (engaging in such practices) as making statements, giving orders, asking questions, and so on? One sign which would indicate they had a language would be: "If we watch their behavior we find it intelligible, it seems logical." (L. Wittgenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 82e.) But then suppose, Wittgenstein continues, that "... when we try to learn their language we find it impossible to do so. For there is no regular connection between what they say, the sounds they make, and their actions. . . . There is not enough regularity for us to call it 'language.'" (*Ibid.*) The point here is that if it is impossible to learn what appears to be the language of a group, there is actually no language, however similar in appearance to linguistic behavior its behavior may be. Unless there is some way to *train* a person to *use* an alleged language, we cannot say that it is a language. More generally, if there is to be a social practice defined by rules, there must be some way of learning (or of teaching) how to engage in the practice or follow the rules. This is part of what we mean by a social practice. Thus Wittgenstein contrasts acting according to a rule with acting according to inspiration.

Let us imagine a rule intimating to me which way I am to obey it; that is, as my eye travels along [a] line, a voice within me says: "This way!"—What is the difference between this process of obeying a kind of inspiration and that of obeying a rule? For they are surely not the same. In the case of inspiration I *await* direction. I shall not be able to teach anyone else my 'technique' of following the line. Unless, indeed, I teach him some way of heartening, some kind of receptivity. But then, of course, I cannot require him to follow the line in the same way as I do. (*Ibid.*, p. 87e. See also, Part I, Section 237.)

What makes a rule capable of being learned (or taught) is the fact that following it implies a regularity of behavior and, in addition, the satisfying of a criterion or test of correct behavior. If one acts in accordance with a rule, it must make sense to say "Here he is doing the *same* thing as he did before," and also to say "Here he is doing the *correct* thing, there he is not." The rule specifies which acts will

count as being the same as other acts, and which acts are to be counted as correct. Unless both factors are stated, it would not be possible to learn or to teach what it is to follow (and also to break) the rule. One would not be able to know whether, in a given set of circumstances, the act which one was doing was an act of the kind required or forbidden by the rule, or whether such an act was the correct thing to do.

Learning how to follow rules is gaining mastery of a technique; it is acquiring a skill. *Teaching* someone how to follow rules is training him in a technique; it is developing in him a skill. *Knowing how* to follow rules is having a skill; it is being able to engage in a practice. All of this is true of learning, teaching, or knowing a language, in Wittgenstein's view. "To understand a language means to be master of a technique." (*Ibid.*, p. 81e.) When we learn a language, however, we learn not only one technique but a whole complex set of techniques. To speak a language is not just to engage in one practice, but to engage in many different practices. For every time we learn the meaning of a word we learn a new technique, the technique of using the word correctly. To be taught a language is to be taught how to use the language, and this means to be taught a great many uses of words for a great many purposes. One might say that a language is a composite practice made up of a number of practices, each of which is a (correct, established) use of a word. The rules of a language are then seen to be the rules governing the correct uses of words. Learning a new word in a language (or learning a new use of an old word) thus involves learning to follow a new set of rules. The multiplicity and variety of the practices (word-uses) which constitute a language are emphasized by Wittgenstein in the series of "language games" which he constructs in *The Blue and Brown Books* and in *Philosophical Investigations*. Each "language game" presents a different use of words, that is, a different set of rules governing the use of words. Each "language game" accordingly is a social practice.

B. Language as a set of instruments

The second basic feature of language which is analyzed by Wittgenstein is its function as an instrument or set of instruments.

With regard to any practice it is always possible to ask, What is the point of it? In other words, for what purpose do people engage in it? It is true that we do not usually ask this question about playing games, but that is only because we all know the purpose for which games are ordinarily played, namely either for the entertainment of the players, or (if they are professionals) for monetary reward. However, we may sometimes wonder how certain practices which are part of a game are to be understood in terms of the point of the game as a whole. We wonder what purpose is served by these practices. Wittgenstein constructs some imaginary rules for chess in order to raise this kind of question.

The game, one would like to say, has not only rules but also a *point*. . . . But, after all, the game is supposed to be defined by the rules! So, if a rule of the game prescribes that the kings are to be used for drawing lots before a game of chess, then that is an essential part of the game. What objection might one make to this? That one does not see the point of this prescription. Perhaps as one wouldn't see the point either of a rule by which each piece had to be turned round three times before one moved it. If we found this rule in a board-game we should be surprised and should speculate about the purpose of the rule. ('Was this prescription meant to prevent one from moving without due consideration?') (*Ibid.*, pp. 150e-151e.)

Once we see how a game is played by understanding what is involved in following the rules, we can raise a question about the point of (ie., the purpose served by) any particular rule of the game.

We may do the same thing for any practice, including the practice of a language. The rules for the employment of linguistic expressions may define many different sorts of practices (games). "Think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws.—The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects." (*Ibid.*, p. 6e.)

Sentences as well as words may be understood as tools or instruments. When we become confused about the sense of a sentence, Wittgenstein offers us the following advice.

Look at the sentence as an instrument, and at its sense as its employment. (*Ibid.*, p. 126e.)

Ask yourself: On what occasion, for what purpose, do we say this? What kind of actions accompany these words? ('Think of a greeting'.) In what scenes will they be used, and what for? (*Ibid.*, p. 137e.)

It is in this way that we come to see how words and sentences are instruments used to accomplish certain purposes. In each case we come to understand the *point* of a practice which constitutes part of a language.

But there is no single point of the practice of a language as a whole. Speaking a language has many purposes. It has all the purposes for which words and sentences are used in the language. Wittgenstein lists a few of these purposes early in *Philosophical Investigations*.

- Giving orders, and obeying them—
 - Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—
 - Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—
 - Reporting an event—
 - Speculating about an event—
 - Forming and testing a hypothesis—
 - Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—
 - Making up a story; and reading it—
 - Play-acting—
 - Singing catches—
 - Guessing riddles—
 - Making a joke; telling it—
 - Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—
 - Translating from one language into another—
 - Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying. (*Ibid.*, pp. 11e-12e.)
- Immediately following this list Wittgenstein adds this significant remark:

—It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.) (*Ibid.*, p. 12e.)

In this criticism of logicians, he is warning us against oversimplifying our concept of language as a practice and as an instrument. It is not one practice or one instrument, having one essential function

and serving one essential purpose. We must take Wittgenstein's own statement "Language is an instrument" (*Ibid.*, p. 151e.) as a summarizing of the idea that language has various uses for many different purposes. He himself qualifies this statement by saying, "Its concepts are instruments." He adds this, I think, in order to prevent us from taking him to mean that language is one tool serving one purpose (*the* purpose of language) rather than a collection of tools serving a variety of purposes.

Wittgenstein frequently refers to the various ways of using language as "language games," and he speaks of the different language games as forming a "family resemblance." In Sections 65-110 of Part I of *Philosophical Investigations*, he argues that it is a "superstition" to search for the essence of language. If we understand the question, "What is language?" as asking for such an essence, it cannot be answered. But if we examine the way words in a language are actually used and the purposes for which they are used, we see that a language is a collection of partly resembling activities. In this respect the concept of a language is like the concept of a game.

Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games.' I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called "games"—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!—Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. . . . And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes over-all similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. (*Ibid.*, pp. 31e-32e.)

If the concept of language is in this respect like the concept of game, have I not been mistaken in saying that a language is a set of practices and a set of instruments? For I seem to be trying to define the

essence of language. But this is not the case. I am only pointing out certain very general features ("over-all similarities") in respect of which all languages resemble one another. *These are the very features which Wittgenstein himself discloses as fundamental to our understanding of the nature of language.*

Suppose one were to object that Wittgenstein has not told us what the distinguishing feature of language is; that he has specified only the genus, not the differentia, of language. Such an objection would miss the point of Wittgenstein's discussion. It is quite true that there are many social practices and instruments which are not languages, and that one can legitimately ask: What is it that makes a practice a linguistic practice? What is it that makes an instrument a linguistic instrument? But one cannot expect these questions to be answered in the way that we answer such a question as: What makes a government a monarchy? This last can be answered by stating the property or combination of properties which all monarchies possess and only monarchies possess. A person who did not know what the word "monarchy" means (but did know what a government is) could then be taught that a monarchy is a certain form of government. He could be taught this by means of a definition *per genus et differentiam*. But the answer to the question "What is a language?" must be of a different sort.

A language is a set of practices defined by certain rules, namely the rules which govern all the various uses of words in the language. This is a circle, but not a vicious one. In the first place, we all know what it is to use words in a language. In the second place no explanation would be of any help to a person who did not know what it is to use words in a language, since every explanation would be itself a use of words in a language. In this situation we can only give examples of different ways of using words (as Wittgenstein does in imagining and describing various language games). There is nothing illogical about this. Our enlightenment comes with noticing certain features of language which we did not notice before, although we did know, in a pre-analytic way, what a language is before these features were brought to our attention. As we think of more and more uses of words for different purposes in an increasing variety of circumstances, we gradually come to a clearer grasp of the nature of

language. We discover how wide a range of practices make up a language, but we discover no boundaries by which to mark off a linguistic from a nonlinguistic practice.

Wittgenstein makes a sharp attack upon logicians who wish to give a *precise* definition of "language." In continuing his comparison between languages and games, he says:

For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can *draw* one; for none has so far been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you used the word 'game'.)

'But then the use of the word is unregulated, the "game" we play with it is unregulated.'—It is not everywhere circumscribed by rules; but no more are there any rules for how high one throws the ball in tennis, or how hard; yet tennis is a game for all that and has rules too. (*Ibid.*, p. 33e.)

We can know what a word (such as "language") means, and so have a clear understanding of a concept, even when there is no neat demarcation of the meaning of the word. Most of the words we use in everyday talk are like this. Most of our concepts have "blurred edges."

One might say that the concept 'game' is a concept with blurred edges.—But is a blurred concept a concept at all?—Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need? (*Ibid.*, p. 34e.)

This does not mean that it is always a mistake to try to make our concepts sharper by drawing boundaries. Wittgenstein repeats a number of times that it is sometimes useful, *for a particular purpose*, to stipulate our own definitions by making clear lines of differentiation among our concepts. But doing this is justified only by a special purpose.

How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: "This and similar things are called "games." And do we know any more about it ourselves? Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is?—But this is not ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because

none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary—for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose.) (*Ibid.*, p. 33e.)

In Wittgenstein's view there is nothing wrong in "... giving prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook." (*Ibid.*, p. 51e.) To reform language in this way may be necessary to prevent misunderstandings.

Such a reform for particular practical purposes, an improvement in our terminology designed to prevent misunderstandings in practice, is perfectly possible. (*Ibid.*)

In the next chapter I shall make such a linguistic reform in defining "normative language," but this discussion of the nature of language in general has not included a boundary-drawing definition of "language." There was no special purpose which would have justified such a definition. At one point in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein states that "the great question that lies behind all these considerations" is not the question of what a language is, but the question of what sort of answer can be given to this question. He explicitly presents the issue in terms of the denial of a search for the essence of all languages.

Here we come up against the great question that lies behind all these considerations.—For someone might object against me: 'You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or parts of language. So you let yourself off the very part of the investigation that once gave you yourself most headache, the part about the *general form of propositions* and of language.'

And this is true.—Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all 'language.' I will try to explain this. (*Ibid.*, p. 31e.)

Wittgenstein then proceeds to a discussion, part of which I have quoted, of the similarities and differences among the many kinds of

games. The concept of language, like the concept of game, is understood not in terms of an essence, but in terms of a "family resemblance."

It is clear that in this account of Wittgenstein's conception of language I have been interested more in the "over-all similarities" among languages—the general characteristics in respect of which the family resemblances are most striking—than in the important differences among them. In the next chapter I shall be interested in one group of languages, namely normative languages. My purpose in this chapter has been to lay a groundwork for constructing a clear concept of normative language. This concept, although drawn with sharp boundaries, will nevertheless conform to the general nature of language as analyzed by Wittgenstein.

The concept of a normative language

II

A. *What is a normative language?*

In light of Wittgenstein's analysis of language, a normative language may be viewed as a set of social practices defined according to certain rules governing the use of the language. There are two basic types of rules that define a normative language. Together they set the framework of a universe of normative discourse. The first type govern the use of words in expressing value judgments and in prescribing. The second type govern the use of words in giving reasons for or against value judgments and prescriptions. We carry on moral discourse, for example, when we pronounce moral judgments and utter moral prescriptions according to the first type of rules and when we justify moral judgments and prescriptions according to the second type of rules. In both cases the particular rules that set the framework of moral discourse define the language of morals. Other normative languages may be defined in the same way.

My thesis in this chapter will be that each universe of normative discourse corresponds to a point of view, and that both are determined by the rules of a normative language. To take a certain