

Language, Mind, and Value by Severin Schroeder

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Severin Schroeder, *Language, Mind, and Value: Essays on Wittgenstein*. London: Anthem Press. 270 pp.

Severin Schroeder's recent book, *Language, Mind, and Value*, offers a compelling exploration of Wittgenstein's later philosophy through a series of 15 insightful essays. Building on Wittgenstein's ideas while developing his own arguments, Schroeder covers a wide range of topics organized into three parts: rules, language, and meaning; philosophy of mind and epistemology; and questions of value, culture, and religion. This review focuses on core themes from Part I, given their significance for the overall direction of the work, and then comments more briefly on the latter two parts.

1. The autonomy of grammar

The autonomy of grammar is the main topic in Part I, and it remains a central theme of the book overall. Schroeder explains this autonomy as follows:

[W]here on different occasions or in different contexts, a word is used according to different rules, it makes no sense to suggest that some are and some are not in agreement with the word's true meaning. (8–9)

There is no standard of meaning above and beyond how people actually use language. Of course, there is the possibility of fledgling rules codifying confusions of the original meaning of a phrase. For instance, it is now quite common to use "beg the question" in place of "raise the question", which probably began with a misunderstanding. However, such situations are transitory, resolved by the phrase settling on a new meaning or the new use phasing out.

Schroeder draws on Wittgenstein's argument that the notion of 'correct' and 'incorrect' linguistic rules would necessitate meta-rules, rules for the following of rules. In that case, those meta-rules would in turn either be autonomous – freely adopted – or themselves be subject to meta-meta-rules. However, although we can justify our use of

words as being more-or-less in conformity with rules, we cannot always justify the rules by reference to further rules, since otherwise we would need an infinite array of meta-rules. Hence, there must be an end to the structure of linguistic rules; there must be a point at which we simply say “this is how it is done” (cf. Wittgenstein, *PI*: § 217).

Part I of the book elaborates this line of argument and its far-reaching consequences. Schroeder discusses potential counter-arguments, drawing from how Wittgenstein himself pre-empted and addressed several objections. Importantly, Schroeder points out that the argument for the autonomy of grammar does not require that individuals must be explicitly aware of every rule they follow in using language. Just as we generally cannot describe everything we do in perfect detail, we cannot justify every aspect of our speech or writing in terms of explicit rules. Indeed, if precise criteria are introduced in an attempt to avoid all exceptions, this would tacitly introduce a new (set of) meta-rule(s), in which case the *reductio* outlined above applies. Grammar can be given no *ultimate* justification (15).

Accordingly, the relevance of any given rule for using a word or phrase in a particular way diminishes insofar as the rule deviates from how people use the terminology in practice. Linguistic rules are simply standards to which people may refer for guidance on how to use and understand language. In making this argument, Schroeder avoids an overly rationalistic account of linguistic normativity. It is not that ontological limitations forbid us from speaking of rules that are beyond the explicit awareness of rule-followers. On the contrary, the problem is that it is all too easy to stipulate hidden rules, thereby making it unclear what would serve as grounds for accounting for a concept in terms of one imagined rule rather than another.

Indeed, Schroeder highlights that Wittgenstein, in later writings, consider linguistic rules mostly an “*ex-post* abstraction” (13). Definitions are written down *after* the use of a word has settled into a stable pattern, a grammatical *norm* (18, 41). The normative nature of language is not laid down anywhere in advance, but is an informal, usually implicit aspect of its everyday use. We correct each other and justify our uses of terms by reference to more or less shared and evolving norms of understanding. Normativity in this sense has to be acknowledged as a basic feature of linguistic interaction and communication. Thus, Schroeder takes the autonomy of grammar to imply that linguistic meaning is an artefact of human activity on all scales and at all resolutions (10).

2. Analytic truths and language-independence

Schroeder draws on this human-centric account of meaning as he proceeds to discuss several tendentious topics. Key among them is analytic truth. He states that “[d]isagreements over an analytic truth indicates a misunderstanding” (28). The claim here is that one or several parties to such a disagreement would operate with some confusion over the words involved, since otherwise everyone would agree on a single, definite set of analytic truths. This may be exaggerated. For one thing, it is not always clear how to adjudicate what counts as confusion. When it comes to essentially contested concepts, such as ‘justice’, opposing sides disagree over what comprises the analytic truths. With

that being said, although such conceptual disputes may be fiery, they presuppose a degree of underlying practical conformity. After all, a conceptual dispute requires not just that a word or phrase is put to distinct uses, but that these uses compete for the same space in people's lives.¹ Alternative formulations of rules need not imply any practical conflict, and *starkly* distinct uses of words do not register as disputes, but as separate concepts passing one another by.

Schroeder discusses several such concerns in a clear, acute manner while defending his view of analytic truth as truths in virtue of linguistic meaning. This makes for intriguing reading due to the fact that he eschews any kind of orthodoxy. At a critical juncture, he considers the objection that a proposition such as 'a vixen is a female fox' is true independently of language; it would be a fact no matter *which* language was used to formulate it (36). In other words, the objection holds that analytic truths are language-independent and therefore cannot be true in virtue of meaning, since meaning is specific to particular languages. In response, Schroeder divorces truths about the meaning of words in a given language, such as English, from truths about the concepts those words express. Analytic truths pertain to the language-independent concepts, not the language-specific words (36).

However, here one might wonder if Schroeder's human-centric conception of meaning should have prompted a different response. Not only is it unclear what distinguishing between the meaning of words and concepts implies about grammar, but such a distinction arguably concedes the main thrust of the objection. A more direct response would be to challenge the assumption that analytic truths are language-independent in the first place. Indeed, analytic judgments could be seen as directly prescriptive, as conveying grammatical rules, in a way that still accounts for their apparent language-independence. For one thing, even if analytic truths like 'a vixen is a female fox' are prescriptive, they would still have a truth-value. Their truth would be akin to a truth about a game, such as the fact that the bishop moves diagonally in chess. Here, we operate with a notion of 'truth' and 'falsehood' that pertains to how people should act to conform with relevant standards. It follows that the descriptive appearance of analytic truths does not necessarily mean that they should be taken to be non-normative.

Indeed, this connects to a broader issue. Schroeder conceives of grammatical rules as "general formulations of grammatical norms" (40). Although this way of relating explicit rules to tacit norms has the benefit of simplicity, it is potentially misleading. After all, it implies that someone uttering a grammatical rule is first and foremost stating something that is correct or incorrect depending on whether what is said conforms to (i.e. is an adequate general formulation of) the relevant norms. However, when someone pronounces a rule, they are usually attempting to direct the behaviour of others in a certain way. The distinction may be subtle, but it is nonetheless important. Again, illustrating with the rules of a game might be helpful. A person stating that the bishop moves diagonally need not even be aware of the fact that she is characterizing 'chess' as such. She is not, at

¹ See Wittgenstein *PI*: § 241 and Robinson (2004: 206), who emphasizes this, and cf. Garver (1990: 257).

least primarily, attempting to *describe* the game of chess, but to make the listeners interact with her and each other in a specific way.

It is similar with grammar. Even though the proposition ‘a vixen is a female fox’ is not about English as such, its assertion *does* reinforce a zoological classification that is part of the English language. That classificatory effect gives the sentence a *point*, which is not to say that it gives it a sense. The *role* of grammatical statements is prescriptive, and their sense as propositions is secondary. Indeed, we prepare and structure language partly by making such statements; enforcing rules is part of our linguistic norms. This being so, the objection that the truth-value of ‘a vixen is a female fox’ is independent of English can be answered as follows: regardless of its truth-value, expressing it would have no *point* outside of a language that is grammatically identical to English in important respects. The sentence can be translated across several languages, but that is to be expected given that broadly similar scientific and folk practices have led geographically distinct peoples to converge on analogous taxonomies. On this view, the apparent language-independence of analytic truths is best explained by linguistic commonalities, reflecting humanity’s shared forms of behaviour (“*Die gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise*”, Wittgenstein, *PI*: § 206).

3. Hinges and values

The second part of the book is titled “Mind, Action, Belief & Knowledge”. As the title suggests, Schroeder here turns to a range of interrelated issues in epistemology and the philosophy of mind. The high quality of argumentation of the first part is maintained. Chapter 10, “Farewell to Hinge Propositions” is perhaps the most controversial essay. In it, Schroeder rejects the idea that Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* introduces a new category of quasi-propositions, so-called “hinge propositions”, that serve as the foundation of our language-games. Exegetically, Schroeder (146) reminds us of the unfinished nature of the relevant remarks. Wittgenstein himself clearly regarded his ideas on this matter to be tentative and subjected them to a substantial degree of questioning in his own notes, every now and again retracting previously made statements. Philosophically, Schroeder argues that it is a mistake to view hinge-propositions as anything other than ordinary empirical statements.

On the one hand, the exegetical argument is convincing; there are good reasons to avoid interpreting Wittgenstein as positing a special category of quasi-propositions as forming the grounds for our language games. On the other hand, the philosophical argument is more disputable insofar as it moves beyond that denial. In Schroeder’s identification of hinge-propositions with empirical propositions *tout court*, he draws a sharp distinction between the sense of a proposition and its relevance in a given context. For instance, he likens “I know I have a hand” to “pigs can’t fly”, taking both to be obvious empirical statements that involve no misuse of words (Schroeder 2024: 148). However, while these sentences are syntactically well-formed, it is more disputable to what extent it would make sense for a person to utter them. That is, even though what counts as reasonable behaviour is separate from what constitutes linguistic sense, the two can often

be related. The reply to someone remarking “pigs can’t fly” would be “what makes you say that?” and if no reason can be given, it is arguably not clear what was said at all. The distinction between the merely unexpected and the nonsensical is not always sharp, and the same goes for the distinction between the empirical and the grammatical, as Wittgenstein stressed in several contexts.²

To my mind, an important lesson from Wittgenstein’s writings is that the same symbol or sentence can have entirely different functions depending on the context. Truisms, like “here is a hand” and “the Earth has existed for a long time”, can alternate between expressing empirical propositions and grammatical rules, depending on the situation. An English teacher asking “do you know what a hand is?” might be met with the answer “yes, here is a hand” while waving. In this case, although the answer could be taken as asserting an empirical proposition, that is not how it would be received. The teacher is not wondering whether there is a hand nearby. Rather, the relevant aspect of the response is that it demonstrates the pertinent linguistic know-how by reiterating part of the grammar of “hand”.

Schroeder argues that a sentence functions as an ordinary empirical proposition even when taken to exemplify the use of a word (158-160). But, returning to the classroom illustration, given that the entire point was to demonstrate the concept of ‘hand’, that insistence on the empirical function becomes tenuous. In general, it seems fair to say that the conditions around a sentence’s utterance partly determine its particular function. To give another example from chess, one can show the rules by moving the pieces deliberately across the board. These movements are physically identical to chess moves, but they are not actual moves in a game. To my mind, Wittgenstein’s analogies of grammatical statements with such preparatory actions succeed in showing a clear discontinuity with empirical propositions.

This being so, even though Moorean truisms do not form a special class of quasi-propositional certainties, such sentences *do* serve as bridges between descriptive and normative uses of language. In the classroom situation it is obvious that the pupil does not intend to inform the teacher of the presence of a hand. The sheer *irrelevance* of the statement about the hand suffices to determine its role as non-descriptive and normative.³ However, in philosophical contexts, the distinction is not always so clear. Wittgenstein highlighted the distorted concept of ‘certainty’ – and its flipside, philosophical scepticism – which results from confusing the normative role of truisms with their empirical epistemological status.

Part III of the book is titled “Aesthetics, Ethics, & Religion”. In these essays, Schroeder is arguably even more careful than in the two earlier parts, without making the writing any less impactful. He draws from a wide range of interesting, sometimes

² See, for instance, *PI*: § 513: “[...] ‘The number of my friends is n , and $n^2 + 2n + 2 = 0$.’ Does this sentence make sense? This cannot be seen immediately. From this example one can see how it can come about that something looks like a sentence which we understand, and yet makes no sense.” Cf. Schroeder 2024: 150.

³ It would be unusual to state “this is *not* a hand” while holding up a hand to demonstrate one’s understanding of the word. However, doing so would achieve the same, while showing a predilection for sarcasm.

humorous examples while questioning and elaborating on Wittgenstein's understanding of aesthetic and moral judgement. In general, Schroeder succeeds in highlighting ways in which morality and aesthetics are bound up with culture and the cultivation of taste.

Chapter 15, "The Tightrope Walker," should be of special interest to many. In this chapter, Schroeder argues against the notion that Wittgenstein regarded religious belief as purely metaphorical or merely an expression of an attitude towards life. As Schroeder shows, Wittgenstein acknowledged that the Christian faith involves belief in the existence of God along with various other credal statements, even though he, at least at certain points in his life, flatly denied the plausibility of those credal statements (227). Given that Wittgenstein nevertheless sought to affirm the reasonableness of Christian faith, he was arguably attempting to exempt religion from epistemic standards that would normally apply. Schroeder's critical discussion of this tension is both relevant and incisive.

Overall, *Language, Mind, and Value* is an excellent book that provides deep insight into Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Even where there is room for disagreement it leads to worthwhile discussions, which is testament to the quality of the writing. Schroeder's critical engagement with a wide range of philosophical issues showcases the breadth and strength of his arguments. This book is a valuable resource not only for students and scholars interested in Wittgenstein's work but also for those who appreciate independent philosophical thought.

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