

Wittgenstein on Habit and Custom: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

This paper presents a conceptual analysis of Wittgenstein's use of the notions of habit and custom. References to habit and custom abound in Wittgenstein's writings already from the 1930s, but no particular focus has been placed on his actual use of these notions. The aim of the paper is to provide a preliminary conceptual tool useful for developing a fruitful engagement between Wittgenstein's "post-tractarian" philosophy and contributions to the philosophy of habit. To do this, I will first trace relevant occurrences in Wittgenstein's writings. Secondly, I will map the use of these concepts by identifying three related families of German expressions: *Gepflogenheit*, *Gewohnheit* and *Gebrauch/Sitte*. Finally, I will present three philosophical contexts in which the two notions play an important role: 1. remarks on rule-following; 2. imaginary cases; 3. meta-philosophical remarks on philosophical problems. I will conclude that Wittgenstein's reference to habit and custom is an important element of his anthropological or pragmatic turn.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Habit, Custom, Habituation, Conceptual analysis.

1. Introduction

The last decade has seen a significant increase in interest and research on the philosophy of habit.¹ Indeed, as highlighted by Barandiaran and Di Paolo (2014), many philosophers from Aristotle onwards have dealt more or less explicitly with the notion of habit. However, interest in habitual behaviour in the 20th century suffered from the dominance of representational theories of mind and behaviouristic theories of behaviour, which reduced habits to automatic and non-intelligent modes of response. Recent interest in habit is partly due to the richer embodied, enacted, extended and embedded sensitivity informing philosophy of mind.²

¹ For example, Carlisle 2014, Piazza 2018, Caruana and Testa 2021, Hutchinson and Sparrow 2013, Bennett 2023.

² I say "partly" because there are other contributing factors, such as recent studies of neural plasticity and a new conception of subjectivity as "anthropotechnique". See Portera 2020: 14 on this.

Within this new paradigm, Wittgenstein is sometimes mentioned. Carlisle (2014: 144), for example, suggests that Wittgenstein's intense reflection on everyday forms of expression penetrates the veil of habit. Similarly, Crossley (2013: 296, 304) mentions Wittgenstein when discussing Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* qua "feel of the game", attributing to Wittgenstein a more socially informed conception of rules as based on an agreement in forms of life.

Indeed, references to habit and custom abound in Wittgenstein's writings already from the 1930s, and are an important element of his anthropological or pragmatic turn.³ Globally, scholars have addressed Wittgenstein's reference to habit in three main contexts. First of all, the rule-following remarks, together with Wittgenstein's characterization of meaning as use. In this context, authors have worked on the relationship between habits and rules (Andronico 2018, Dreon 2016, Zhok 2014, Crocker 1998, McGinn 2010, Callegaro 2012), and habits and meaning (Zhok 2014, Chauviré 2012, Luntley 2012). Second, Wittgenstein's remarks on anti-Cartesian certainty (Fabbrichesi 2004, Pihlström 2012, Bennett-Hunter 2012, Boncompagni 2016, Coliva 2022). Finally, it has been argued that the reference to habits is part of a philosophical defence of a kind of immediacy of experience which is not reduced to a private *Erlebnis* (Dreon 2018, Morelli 2018). In these works, however, the notion of habit is mainly used as an *evaluative* term, rather than the one *being evaluated*. That is to say, the notion is used to give an account of some aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy—or comparisons with other philosophical traditions, such as classical pragmatism—but there is no particular focus on the notion itself and the way it is used by Wittgenstein.

My working assumption is that there can be a fruitful engagement between Wittgenstein's "post-tractarian" philosophy and both historical and recent contributions to the philosophy of habit, but a preliminary conceptual analysis of Wittgenstein's use of the notions of habit and custom is needed. The aim of this paper is to provide that preliminary conceptual tool. I will focus on Wittgenstein's use of the notions of habit and custom in order to map conceptual differences that shed light on the notion of habit in general. To do this, I will first trace the relevant occurrences of the terms "habit" and "custom" in Wittgenstein's writings. I will work, where necessary, with English editions and their German originals.⁴ Secondly, I will map the use of the two notions by identifying three main related families of German expressions: *Gepflogenheit*, *Gewohnheit* and *Gebrauch/Sitte*. As we will see, these terms and their derivatives are all translated into English as "habit"/"custom", but they are used by Wittgenstein in significantly different contexts and with a certain consistency. Finally, I will present three main philosophical contexts in which each of the analysed notions

³ By "pragmatic turn" I am not referring to classical pragmatism, that is, I am not arguing that Wittgenstein is a pragmatist. I am referring to Wittgenstein's "post-tractarian" focus on ordinary practices, uses, and the primacy of praxis in the study of language over mentalistic and intellectualistic accounts.

⁴ Some of the works considered were originally written in English, so there is no German original to consider. In particular, I am referring to *Whewell's Court Lectures: Cambridge, 1938–1941* (WWL) and *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, Cambridge 1939* (LFM). This material consists of the notes taken by Wittgenstein's students during his lectures at Cambridge. The lectures were delivered in English. See the section "Abbreviations" for the abbreviations of Wittgenstein's works.

plays an important role: 1. remarks on rule-following; 2. remarks on imaginary cases; 3. meta-philosophical remarks on philosophical problems as arising from misleading habitual ways of thinking and acting. I will conclude that the notions of habit and custom are important conceptual tools of Wittgenstein's philosophical method used in both his *pars destruens* and his *pars construens*.

2. Mapping Occurrences

In the original German editions, Wittgenstein uses a total of four German expressions which are then translated either as "habit" or "custom", although the occurrences of "custom" are much more numerous than those of "habit":

1. *Gepflogenheit* (PI: §§198, 199, 205, 337; RFM: VI §§21, 43);
2. *Gewohnheit* and its derivatives (PI: §363; PPF: 201; RPP: I §§47, 177, 292, 343, 359, 361, 676, 1087; OC: §237; PG: I §34, 432; BB: 23, 83; RFM: III §54, II §56, VI §§21, 43; Z: §371; VW: 19, 75, 107, 111, 259);
3. *Gebrauch* (PPF: 175; RPP: I §§177, 321, PG: 442; BB: 110);
4. *Sitte* (VW: 501).

I have compared the various occurrences to see whether there is a consistent use of some German expressions rather than others in particular contexts, and whether this use is preserved, overshadowed or enhanced by the adopted English translation.

On the one hand, the English distinction between "habit" and "custom" is not always preserved in the German text.⁵ Wittgenstein often uses the same German expression, "*Gewohnheit*", where in English we find either "habit" or "custom". Consider, for example, the following passages taken from the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, where "habit" and "custom" appear as nouns in the English edition:

- A. And don't you want to say that one aspect appears in all of these word-uses, a unitary, genuine concept?—But how much is there in that? May not the force of *habit* weld all of this together? (RPP: II §221, my emphasis).
- B. Any other arrangement would strike us as incorrect. Through *custom* these forms become a paradigm; they acquire so to speak the force of law. ('The power of *custom*'?) (RPP: I §343, my emphasis).

In A we find the expression "the force of habit", while in B we find the expression "the power of custom".⁶ Given this, one might be tempted to think that Wittgenstein is discussing two different things here, but in fact he uses the same German term in both cases, namely *Gewohnheit*.

I quote below the German version of both passages:⁷

⁵ In this context, I take the distinction to be lexical. I am not addressing the philosophical weight of the distinction here. My observation is that the translators translated the German word "*Gewohnheit*" sometimes as "habit", sometimes as "custom".

⁶ The expression "the force of habit" is found also in VW: 75. In this context too, the German equivalent is "*Gewohnheit*" (*Gewohnheit Versucht*).

⁷ For another example, see LW: I §126 and RPP: I §676.

A. Und willst du nicht sagen, du sähest doch *ein* Gesicht in allen diesen Wortverwendungen, einen einheitlichen, echten Begriff?—Aber was will das sagen? Kann nicht *Gewohnheit* all das zusammenschweißen? (RPP: II §221, second emphasis added).

B. Jede andere Zusammenstellung würde uns unrichtig erscheinen. Durch unsere *Gewohnheit* werden diese Formen zu einem Paradigma; sie erhalten sozusagen Gesetzeskraft ('die Macht der *Gewohnheit*?') (RPP I §342, my emphasis).

On the other hand, with regard to the four expressions presented above, the term “custom” is used to translate a greater number of German expressions than “habit”, which is used only for “*Gewohnheit*”. In PI §143 we find the English expression “bad habit”, which translates “*Unart*”. However, “*Unart*” is a specific word with a negative and individual connotation—it means bad habit, or rude habit⁸—so it is plausible to think that where we see the English term “habit”, in the original German text we mainly find the expression “*Gewohnheit*”. The other German expressions presented above—“*Gepflogenheit*”, “*Gebrauch*” and “*Sitte*”—are translated only with “custom”. In some cases, the adjective “customary” translates the German expressions “*Herkömmlichen*”, as in “customary counterweights” (PG: 236), and “*Üblichen*”, as in “the customary representation of the calculus” (VW: 211). “*Herkömmlichen*” means traditional or conventional, and it can also be used as an adverb meaning “traditionally” or “conventionally”. “*Üblich*” is a synonym for “*Herkömmlichen*” and means usual, normal, customary or habitual. However, Wittgenstein mainly uses derivatives of “*Gewohnheit*” when he speaks of customary and habitual ways of doing things: “*Gewöhnt*” and “*Gewöhnlich*”.

Finally, it is important to note that in many passages the English terms “habit” and “custom” translate other German expressions which are not nouns, that is, where Wittgenstein does not actually use any of the German expressions presented at the beginning of this section. For example, in the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, “habits” is used to translate the expression “*von dem Leben der Tiere geredet*” (PPF: §19), and in *The Voices of Wittgenstein*, “being in the habit of” is used to translate “*man pflegt da zu sagen*” and “*pflegt man zu sagen*” (VW: 227, 383).⁹ Again, in the *Philosophical Remarks* (§138) we find the term “habit” in “where the nonsense starts is with our habit of thinking of a large number as closer to infinity than a small one”, but Wittgenstein uses the expression “*so oft denkt*”, which literally means “so often”. He is certainly talking about what people often think, a common way of thinking, but there is no actual reference to habit.

3. Mapping Uses

In this section, I shall reflect on the occurrences of the terms “habit” and “custom” presented above. In particular, I argue that conceptually the four German expressions presented in the previous section can be grouped into three distinct families:

⁸ I have used two online dictionaries: the Cambridge Dictionary and the Collins German Dictionary. Cf. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>; <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-german>

⁹ “*Pflegt man zu sagen*” was also translated as “to be accustomed” (VW: 481).

1. *Gepflogenheit*;
2. *Gewohnheit* (together with *Gewöhnt*, *Gewöhnlich* and *Gewöhnung*);
3. *Gebrauch/Sitte*.

Within Wittgenstein's philosophy, these three groups of linguistic expressions reflect both a difference in use and a difference in philosophical context. I will deal with the former aspect in this section and develop the latter aspect in the next.

As we have seen, in the English translation, the distinction between "habit" and "custom" often covers the use of the same German term, "*Gewohnheit*". At the same time, in ordinary English there seems to be an implicit distinction between habit and custom, since the noun "custom" is associated with the nouns "*Gepflogenheit*", "*Gebrauch*" and "*Sitte*", but not with the nouns "*Gewohnheit*" and "*Gewöhnung*", which are rendered only as "habit" and "habituation". Indeed, according to dictionaries, while "*Gepflogenheit*" means custom, habit, tradition and practice, the term "*Gewohnheit*" means only habit, either in the sense of the force of habit, or the usual ways of doing things and the tendency to do the same things as one has always done. The same is true of the noun "*Gewöhnung*", which means habituation, familiarization or training. "*Gebrauch*" and "*Sitte*" have a more collective meaning than "*Gewohnheit*": "*Gebrauch*" means use, but also usage, convention, application and custom, while "*Sitte*" means custom, tradition or manners and is synonymous with "*Brauch*". On the one hand, this distinction partly reflects the distinction between an individual level of personal habits and a collective level of shared customs and traditions. This view is also shared by Bruce Donaldson (2004), according to whom the terms "*Sitte*" and "*Gebrauch*" are used to refer to the customs of other cultures; "*Gepflogenheit*" is a more elevated word, with a positive connotation, often used to refer to the customs or norms of the upper crust, while "*Gewohnheit*" refers to what is the result of the force of habit, either good or bad. On the other hand, while I think that what Donaldson writes about "*Gebrauch*", "*Sitte*" and "*Gewohnheit*" applies quite well to Wittgenstein's use of these terms, the conceptual distinction between the individual and collective levels only *partially* represents Wittgenstein's use, for he uses "*Gepflogenheit*" in a very specific context and differently from "*Sitte*" and "*Gebrauch*". Therefore, my idea is that there is indeed a distinction between (individual) habit and (collective) custom, but this is only one of the rich conceptual nuances of Wittgenstein's use of the concepts and this rich use is better captured by the conceptual distinction presented above.

In what follows, I shall present the three main uses separately, with a more explicit comparison between them at the end of the section.

1. "*Gepflogenheit*" is always used in the context of rule-following considerations alongside the terms "practice", "use", "technique" and "institution", and it is always translated into English as "custom". Custom, in this context, is what is implied by the concept of "following a rule" (RFM: VI §21). In this sense, the expression does not refer either to individual habits, such as routines, or to culturally defined collective habits, such as traditions or mores. Besides, a *Gepflogenheit* is not primarily something that is the product of the force of habituation, but rather refers to a rule-governed practice, a regular use, a technique that lies at the basis of particular ways of acting and works as a standard or rule. The habitual character of a customary practice as *Gepflogenheit* consists in the fact that "it would be nonsense to say: just once in the history of the world someone followed a rule (or a

signpost; played a game, uttered a sentence, or understood one; and so on)” (RFM: VI §21), whereas “it can be said that just once in the history of mankind did some walk parallel with a board” (RFM: VI §43).

2. “*Gewohnheit*” is not used in a specific context like “*Gepflogenheit*”. On the contrary, Wittgenstein uses this expression and its derivatives extensively in his remarks. He uses the nouns “*Gewohnheit*”/“*Angewohnheit*”/“*Gewohnung*” (LW: I §126, RFM: I §131, BB: 34, 61, PPF: 201, RPP: I §§343, 676), and the adjectives “*Gewöhnlich*”/“*Gewöhnt*” (PI: §363, RPP: I §§47, 177, 221, 292, 359, PG: 371, BB: 23, 83, VW: 19, 75, 107, 111, 259). In particular, I distinguish two uses: in some cases, Wittgenstein uses the noun “*Gewohnheit*” to refer to particular habitual and recurrent actions or to particular individual habits; in other cases, Wittgenstein uses the nouns “*Gewohnheit*” and “*Gewohnung*” to refer to the process of habituation, the force of habit by which people become accustomed to something.

As far as the first use is concerned, Wittgenstein imagines, for example, the case of the habit of saying what is going on in one’s mind immediately after one has said something (LW: I §126), or of someone who habitually says to herself “So I can get up” every time she gets up from a chair (RPP: I §221).¹⁰ The term “*Gewohnheit*” is usually translated as “habit” in this context. Actually, it is translated as “custom” in CV: 95, where Wittgenstein is talking about the custom of certain people to throw a ball to someone who is supposed to catch it and throw it, but in this example Wittgenstein is using the term with a more explicit collective connotation.¹¹ That is, he is not talking about particular individual habits, but about common behaviours within a particular group, society or tribe. These are the kinds of behaviours that we would have to take into account, for example, if we wanted to enquire about their grammar, about the way people use such and such a word (WWL: 197). For this reason, I suggest that the term “habit” in this context better captures occurrences of “*Gewohnheit*” as what individuals are used to doing, but not primarily as members of a particular society. Rather, it refers to specific individual habits that people have and that can gradually change, just like the body and the voice (BB: 61).

As far as the latter use is concerned, Wittgenstein often asks the reader to focus on the fact that we are accustomed to thinking and behaving in certain ways, and that we can become accustomed to thinking and behaving in certain ways. This very fact is the product of the power of custom, and it is philosophically important because, as we will see in the next section, it is at the source of both our actual grammar and of our deepest misunderstandings and deceptive images. It is a fact of nature that, for example, we are accustomed to communicating through language in conversation (PI: §363), to drawing with pencil, pen or the like (RPP: I §47), to using dashes for lines and dots for points (LFM: 147) and, more generally, to responding to certain signals in such and such a way (VW: 107, 111).¹² But we are also accustomed to certain ways of thinking (RFM: 371), to certain de-

¹⁰ For other examples, see BB: 34, WWL: 108, RFM: II §6, RFM: I §131.

¹¹ See also RFM: I §676.

¹² For other examples, see RPP: I §292 (speaking of the colour of the face as a sign of fever), VW: 259 (always considering $f(a)$ a complex), WWL: 234 (using words that can be explained by pointing to certain objects), LFM: 204 (recording the results of an experiment in a graph).

scriptions (WWL: 162) and to certain ways of looking at phenomena (WWL: §242). We are accustomed to certain things, which we consequently consider familiar and take for granted, and we consequently behave in a certain manner: this is the product of the “force of habit” (RPP: II §221, VW: 75). “The power of custom” [*die Macht der Gewohnheit*] (RPP: I 343), “habituation” [*Gewohnung*] (RPP: II 424, Z: 355) and “custom” [*Gewohnheit*] are something that, together with upbringing [*Erziehung*], is responsible for the fact that something immediately conveys something to us and not to other people (PPF: 201) and, above all, makes some forms a paradigm which has the force of a law (RPP: I §343).

On a whole, the term “habit” is used mainly to refer to certain habitual ways of doing things, while “custom” is used to refer to the process of habituation and the way in which people actually become accustomed to something. The German term is the same, “*Gewohnheit*”, but it is interesting to note that when Wittgenstein writes in English, or when he gives his lectures in English, he uses “custom”, not “habit”, to refer to habituation and collective habits. For this reason, even though the term “*Gewohnheit*” in the expressions “the power /force of” is translated both as “custom” and as “habit”, I prefer to translate it as “custom”.

3. “*Gebrauch*”/“*Sitte*”. Wittgenstein uses these terms to refer to collective practices, shared patterns of behaviour and they are rightly translated as “custom” or, in the case of “*Gebrauch*”, “use”. They are both situated at a collective level, and are thus distinct from individual, personal habits, but they are nonetheless grammatically distinct. “*Sitte*” specifically means a particular cultural custom, a tradition. It is used when we want to talk about the customs of other people, societies, cultures. It has a strong sociological connotation. The term appears in VW when Wittgenstein asks the reader to imagine a custom [*Sitte*] of a tribe to mark the place that a man is to occupy in an assembly by means of inscribing his coat of arms in the sand (VW: 501). By contrast, the use of “*Gebrauch*” is strictly related to that of “*Gepflogenheit*”, for it is used to speak of background stable and shared practices that underlie particular language games and which constitute particular forms of life.¹³ “A person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use [*ständigen Gebräuch*] of sign-posts” (PI: §198), and “to obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs [*Gepflogenheiten*] (uses [*Gebräuche*], institutions)” (PI: §199). This is not to say that a *Sitte* does not constitute a form of life, or that Wittgenstein does not take cultural specificities into account. But there is a subtle difference between speaking of foreign customs as traditions and manners, and speaking of particular practices as stable underground paradigms at the basis of action and thinking. There is a difference, so to speak, between the Italian custom of eating spaghetti by rolling them on a fork and the custom of stopping at red lights. This difference, as I will argue in the next section, is a normative difference.

A *Gebrauch* is a particular common usage, a particular common way of doing some standardized activities in a particular system. For example, in the context of

¹³ One might wonder why I have not discussed “*Gebrauch*” together with “*Gepflogenheit*” instead of “*Sitte*”. The reason is that “*Gebrauch*” is not used exclusively in the context of rule-following remarks, as “*Gepflogenheit*” is. Since my first objective was to map occurrences, I decided to keep “*Gepflogenheit*” separate and to group “*Gebrauch*” with “*Sitte*” because, although they are used differently by Wittgenstein, they are translated with “custom” and both belong to the collective level of shared practices and customs.

the philosophy of mathematics, Wittgenstein asks whether we can imagine a particular equation being regarded as a definition. His answer seems to suggest that we can, if we imagine a system in which there is the “custom (*Gebrauch*) to write out the whole chain instead of the right hand side” and if “we introduced the abbreviation” (PG: 442). It is also interesting to note that patterns of use can be independent of the existence of particular linguistic expressions, that is, the reference to action and behaviour is primary. For example, Wittgenstein asks the reader to imagine the case of a tribe in which “contests are held in running, putting the weight, etc., and the spectators stake possessions on the competitors”. The spectators place pieces of gold under one of the pictures of the competitors, and if a spectator has placed his gold under the picture of the winner, she receives double her stake, otherwise she loses her stake. Now, Wittgenstein writes that we should undoubtedly call this custom [*Gebrauch*] betting, “even if we observed it in a society whose language held no scheme for stating ‘degrees of probability’, ‘chances’ and the like” (BB: 110). This custom is a rule-governed activity.

To conclude this section, I have shown so far that, looking at the original German texts, the linguistic occurrences of “habit” and “custom” in the English editions can be organized into three main families of use of the concepts. First of all, the term “*Gewohnheit*” stands both for particular habits and customs and for the process of habituation by which these habits and customs are acquired, maintained and possibly changed. In this context, while the term “habit” is mainly used to refer to individual recurring behaviours, “custom” is used to refer to collective and shared behaviours and practices. Secondly, collective customs are also referred to by the expressions “*Sitte*” and “*Gebrauch*”, where the former refers to cultural customs and conventions, while the latter is less culturally connoted and refers to common uses and practices within a particular system. Finally, “*Gepflogenheit*” is used together with “*Gebrauch*” to refer to common practices as patterns of use and action, but exclusively in the context of philosophical reflection on rule-following. These three main uses correspond to three philosophical contexts in which the notions of habit and custom play a significant role. I will address this issue in the following section.

4. Philosophical Contexts

4.1 Rule-Following Is a Custom [*Gepflogenheit*]

The notion of custom as *Gepflogenheit* is used by Wittgenstein in the remarks on rule-following: what does it mean to follow a rule? How can a rule tell me what to do in a particular case? These are the main questions with which Wittgenstein deals right from his return to philosophy in the 1930s. The interest in rules stems directly from his grammatical turn, that is, the connection between meaning and rules. Meaning is not something that is attached to word in order to make it meaningful, but “for a *large* class of cases [...] the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (PI: §43), where use here is understood as the correct use, that is, the use according to grammatical rules. However, the focus on rules does not in itself imply a computational view of language, for according to Wittgenstein language cannot be characterized as a mere calculus with an objectively definite set of rules (BB: 37), but rather as a typically *human* activity, that is, an activity whose features are in some sense influenced by the features of the subjects that share it and the environment—be it social, cultural or natural—in which it is

embedded (PI: §23). This is the core of what I have elsewhere¹⁴ called Wittgenstein's anthropological turn in the philosophy of language and mind.

In this context, the reference to custom is the fundamental part of Wittgenstein's positive view of following a rule as a practice (*pars construens*) against the interpretational account according to which following a rule always involves an interpretative act (*pars destruens*). In this section I will focus on the *pars construens*, since it is not the aim of this work to present a detailed account of Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following. However, I would like to point out two important things. First of all, the interpretational account takes two different forms, both of which Wittgenstein rejects: on the one hand, the interpretative act is situated in the act of grasping the meaning of the rule, all its future applications being *ideally* contained in the formulation of the rule. This is the Platonist account. On the other hand, the interpretative act is posited for each new case of application of the rule, i.e. for each case of application there must be an intermediate mental act that precedes and guides the action. This is the mentalistic account. In both cases, the mental act—the understanding, the intending—is taken to be the *source* of action, as if a mediation were always necessary between the *mere* formulation of the rule and action in accordance with it. Secondly, from a theoretical point of view, this account is misleading because it leads to a paradox that nullifies the normativity of rules: “Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the rule” (PI: §198), so “no course of action could be determined by a rule”, but “if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here” (PI: §201).

Now, this is a fairly obvious outcome if we consider the formulation of the rule in a vacuum, that is, as something independent of context. Against this way of looking at things, Wittgenstein stresses that following rules is not independent of how we *actually* follow rules. If we look at what “we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases”, there is indeed a way of grasping a rule that is not an interpretation (PI: §201): following a rule is a practice. To say that following a rule is a practice is, for Wittgenstein, to characterize it as a custom [*Gepflogenheit*] that is intersubjectively shared and embedded with other customs in a particular form of life (PI: §199). The nexus between custom and practice is very important because it means that Wittgenstein here is not talking about individual routine habits as recurring and repetitive daily actions, nor about collective, merely culturally defined habits such as traditions and mores. A *Gepflogenheit* has at least the following three features: 1. it is necessary condition for rule-following; 2. it is structurally linked to rules, that is, it is a rule-governed activity; 3. the element of regularity is conceptually necessary to the concept itself.

1. Wittgenstein's main point is that, contrary to mentalism, intentional states such as understanding, intending and meaning are embedded in situations, human customs [*menschlichen Gepflogenheiten*] and institutions (PI §377), and cannot be accounted for independently of this background. It might be tempting to think, for example, that I intend the whole construction of the sentence in my mind before I say it out loud, and to conclude from this that intending is a particular mental state or mental act that precedes some particular action—saying the sentence out loud, for example, or writing it on paper—and gives the agent the instructions

¹⁴ See Morelli 2019.

on how to perform the subsequent action. Wittgenstein does not deny that we actually experience something like this, but he rejects the philosophical conclusion that we tend to draw from this particular experience: “in so far as I do intend the construction of a sentence in advance, that is made possible by the fact that I can speak the language in question” (PI: §377). This also applies to rule-governed behaviour. For example, I could not intend to play chess if the technique of playing chess did not exist (PI: §205). Intending presupposes a practice, “the application of the concept ‘following a rule’ presupposes a custom [*Gepflogenheit*]” (RFM: VI §21), that is, “a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use [*ständigen Gebrauch*] of sign-posts, a custom [*Gepflogenheit*]” (PI: §198). Therefore, I can speak of a mental state or intention because there is already a practice, a shared and established pattern of behaviour, not the other way around.

2. Customs as practices at the basis of human rule-following are also rule-governed activities with *normative import*. The examples of customs as *Gepflogenheit* provided by Wittgenstein are significant in this respect: to obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess (PI: §199). Consequently, “the words ‘language’, ‘proposition’, ‘order’, ‘rule’, ‘calculation’, ‘experiment’, ‘following a rule’ relate to a technique, a custom [*Gepflogenheit*]” (RFM: VI §43). Now, the point I want to stress is that, although not all habits or customs are inherently normative, customs as *Gepflogenheit* are.¹⁵ Individual routine habits do not have the normative power of custom as a rule-governed practice. Consider, for example, the individual habit of taking a shower at the same time every day, just before going to bed. It would be queer to say that it is wrong for that person to take the shower at a different time, or in the morning instead of before going to bed. But if I move a pawn two squares forward from any row but the second while playing chess, I am doing something wrong. I am breaking a rule. I am doing something wrong in relation to a custom or practice, that is, the game of chess itself. If the custom did not exist, I could not make a good or bad move, and this possibility/impossibility is logical, not physical, epistemological or psychological. It is precisely because of this normative import that custom is necessary for rule-following. Custom provides a paradigm both for action and for the evaluation of action. Therefore, *pace* the Platonist and the mentalist, we do not need anything [mental] in addition to custom in order to follow rules: whether a behaviour counts as an application of a rule in a particular case is not written into the formulation of the rule and it is not the product of an additional intellectual process; rather, it is in a certain sense the result of a decision (PI: §186). However, the decision is not the arbitrary and conscious adoption of a convention, but a spontaneous operation resulting from a long training (PI: §219). The application of a rule in a new case functions as a paradigm of correctness for future applications under the same conditions, not as the result of a conscious decision, but rather as a familiar pattern of behaviour that expresses human agreement in action, that is to say, in particular customs as *Gepflogenheit*.

3. The element of regularity is a necessary condition for the concept of custom as *Gepflogenheit*,¹⁶ as it is necessary for the concepts of rule and language

¹⁵ See Andronico 2018 for this point applied to linguistic habits.

¹⁶ It could be argued, as Douskos (2018) does, that it is a necessary condition for the concepts of habit and custom in general, and not just as *Gepflogenheit*. I tend to agree with this point, but I do not have space to develop it here.

themselves. Wittgenstein is quite explicit on this point: “it would be nonsense to say: just once in the history of the world someone followed a rule (or a signpost; played a game, uttered a sentence, or understood one; and so on)” (RFM: VI §21), whereas “it can be said that just once in the history of mankind did some walk parallel with a board” (RFM: VI §43). This possibility is, again, logical, that is, grammatical. First of all, it is important to stress that regularity in this context should not be confused with repetition. To say that regularity is a necessary condition for the concept of custom is not to reduce custom and habit acquisition to mere repetitions of past actions. Regularity is (part of) what is needed for a particular pattern of behaviour to become an *established* practice. Regular is opposed to sporadic, occasional. Secondly, regularity—so conceived—is inherently connected to the development of a sense of familiarity. Indeed, according to Wittgenstein, regular uses and rules are necessary but not sufficient to constitute a practice. What is needed is a sense of familiarity, which is to say that one must feel at ease with the practice itself. The point seems to be that if the application of the rule is not spontaneous and *natural*, nothing can force us to do it. As an example, consider the case of a child who has mastered the order “add 2” correctly up to the number 1000, but after 1000 she writes 1004, 1008, 1012, etc. (PI: §185). Imagine, moreover, that this pupil believes that she is acting correctly, that is, in accordance with the rule “+2”, and that it is of no use for the teacher to repeat or reformulate the expression of the rule in order to change the pupil’s mind. In this case, it is not a question of cognitive competence; rather, “we might perhaps say: this person finds it *natural* [my emphasis], once given our explanations, to understand our order as we would understand the order ‘Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000, and so on’”, and “this case would have similarities to that in which it comes *naturally* [my emphasis] to a person to react to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction from fingertip to wrist, rather than from wrist to fingertip” (PI: §185). The naturalness of the sense of familiarity of a particular practice is acquired, that is, it comes from custom as *Gepflogenheit*. It would be tempting to speak of second nature here, but Wittgenstein never uses the expression “*zweite Natur*”.¹⁷ Rather, he uses the word “*Natur*” in two senses, without postulating two different levels: on the one hand, the word refers to prelinguistic, instinctual forms of behaviour, such as walking and eating. On the other hand, it refers to acquired forms of behaviour that have been turned into nature for us, such as commanding, questioning and chatting (PI: §25). These acquired forms of behaviour are customs: they are learned—specifically in language and through language—they are culturally variable, but they are natural, that is, they still share something with prelinguistic behaviours. What they have in common is the immediacy of action in terms of non-intellectual mediation, a blindness or quasi-instinctuality that comes from the incorporation of a particular custom or practice. That being said, we might make sense of the pupil’s queer behaviour in the example above by recognizing, for example, that she belongs to a system—a form of life—in which there is a custom to add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000, and so on. This custom may certainly be confusing to us, but it gains meaning from the system in which it is embedded, that is to say, it is logically possible to conceive of a culture or tribe in which this particular custom is part of their way of

¹⁷ The expression “second nature” appears only in the English translation of the German text. Wittgenstein simply uses “*Natur*”. See RPP: I §678.

life. Indeed, Wittgenstein's "post-tractarian" production is rife with references to alien imaginary customs and their relation to particular language games.

4.2 Language Games and Imaginary Customs [*Gebrauch/ Sitte*]

Wittgenstein often envisages hypothetical scenarios in which he presents different language games and customs and asks his reader to make *comparisons* between them. In this context, he mainly uses the expression "*Gebrauch*" to refer to these customs and he works with a notion of collective custom rather than individual habit. From a philosophical point of view, the reference to custom functions here as a *heuristic principle* (RPP: I §321). This principle consists in looking at a particular custom in the light of another one. Contrary to Lear's transcendental interpretation (Lear 1984) and Engel's view (Engel 2009), I would argue that this heuristic principle has two functions: on the one hand, it is used by the philosopher to better understand our own practices and customs—that is, it has a self-reflective function. This is what Lear and Engel accept. On the other hand, it can help the philosopher to better understand *other* practices and customs. In other words, reference to imaginary customs improves both the understanding of one's own grammar, and the understanding of other and alien grammars through a sort of imaginative effort that requires practice. In both cases, Wittgenstein establishes a nexus between nature—in the rich sense specified above—and grammar, where custom as *Gebrauch* is a common way of doing some standardized activities in a particular system at the basis of a particular language-game. Comparison between different language-games involves reference to particular customs: as Binkley (1973: 89) rightly points out, imagination is the medium of grammatical investigation.

As far as the first function is concerned, our own practices are clarified by comparison with alien ones, using a morphological-comparative method that Wittgenstein explicitly takes from Goethe.¹⁸ In this case, imaginary cases help us to highlight, by contrast, the functioning of our concepts through a non-metaphysical form of estrangement from our own system. For example, it is useful to imagine a tribe that uses two different systems of counting, and to compare them with ours in order to see similarities and differences (BB: 94).

As far as the second function is concerned, the point is that comparing different language-games—hence different customs—not only highlights the functioning and elasticity of concepts (Perissinotto 2010), but also helps us to better understand concepts that are very different and far removed from our own, which are otherwise aprioristically labelled as strange, unintelligible and even unnatural. In this case, reference to custom enables to develop our understanding of a concept by placing it against the relevant (practical) background.

if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize, then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him (PPF: §366).¹⁹

¹⁸ For a detailed exposition of the morphological method, see Andronico 1998.

¹⁹ Actually, in this passage Wittgenstein speaks of general facts of nature and not of customs. One of the anonymous reviewers objected that imagination of general facts of na-

In this sense, working on customs can be an anti-dogmatic and anti-metaphysical move.

Finally, Monk (2005) suggests that working with imaginary cases is also useful for recognizing and replacing some of the misleading pictures embedded in language. This brings us directly to the last point, where I will discuss the role of custom as a basis for particular ways of thinking.

4.3 The Power of Custom [*Gewohnheit*]

We have seen that Wittgenstein also uses the term “*Gewohnheit*” to refer to the fact that we are accustomed to certain ways of thinking and looking at phenomena, and that we consequently behave in a certain manner because of these particular “thinking habits”. *Gewohnheit* as habituation, or custom, in this sense, is at the basis of thought and action, and Wittgenstein establishes a nexus between mental habits and action itself. In particular, part of his anthropological or pragmatic turn is precisely to focus on the fact that paradigms become such through custom. To speak of the power of custom or the force of habit in this context is to highlight the fact that “through custom [*Gewohnheit*] [particular] forms become a paradigm; they acquire so to speak the force of law. (“The power of custom’?)” (RPP: I §343), and that when we say that a unitary concept seems to appear in a variety of word-uses, then “the force of habit [*Gewohnheit*] might weld all of this together” (RPP: II §221). Indeed, Wittgenstein goes as far as to say that even the laws of logic are the expression of “thinking habits” [*Denkgewohnheiten*] and of the habit of thinking [*Von der gewohnheit zudenken*]. In the former case they show how human beings think, while in the latter case they show what human beings call “thinking” (RFM: I §131). In this section I will suggest that (1) custom as habituation is at the basis of both particular thinking habits and particular habits of action. Consequently, (2) it is also at the basis of misleading thinking habits, i.e. habits that underlie some deceptive philosophical views. But (3) the remedy for these deceptive habits is custom itself, for what is needed is the power of custom to replace one thinking habit with another one.

(1) Custom (i.e. the power of custom) is at the root of established paradigms, and it is at the basis of the explanation of action in terms of *both reasons and causes*. Wittgenstein speaks of this function of custom when he mentions upbringing. The power of custom, together with upbringing, has something to do with our actual ways of thinking, seeing and acting. For example, when discussing aspect-seeing, Wittgenstein considers the case of the image of a scalene triangle and the different aspects of the triangle that we might see. The triangle, for

ture must be kept apart from imagination of different customs, thereby rejecting the idea that customs could be treated as general facts of nature. I thank him/her for these subtle insights about two different imaginative strategies. Although I tend to think that customs, richly considered, could be treated as *facts* of people and groups that lie at the basis of particular linguistic uses, I understand that my point could be misleading. I do not intend to defend the thesis that customs are facts of nature, for this would require a wider treatment of Wittgenstein’s remarks on the given. However, I claim that reference to imaginary customs at least plays a part in our imagining different facts of nature. Even if we grant that we are dealing with two kinds of imagination, I think that imagining a different custom as *Gebrauch* can clarify the use of a particular concept by providing the relevant background against which it gains intelligibility.

example, “can be seen as a triangular hole, as a solid, as a geometrical drawing [...] as a mountain, as a wedge, as an arrow or pointer [...] and as various other things” (PPF: 200c). Depending on which aspect we see or can see, we react differently to the same image. Now, the point is that there is no predetermined, unique form of the picture associated with a particular response to it—there is no “how the picture must be” in order to produce a particular effect. Indeed, Wittgenstein adds that there are styles of painting that convey nothing to some people, but something to others. What changes is not the style itself, but our way of seeing it, so from a Wittgensteinian perspective, custom and upbringing have a hand in it (PPF: 201). Aspect seeing presupposes the mastery of a certain technique, it presupposes a certain custom (*Gebrauch*) established by the force of custom (*Gewohnheit*). Furthermore, as I anticipated above, we refer to custom when we give reasons for particular courses of action. It is important to note, though, that Wittgenstein recognizes both levels of reasons and causes in relation to custom, but wants to make their difference clear. Consider the case of a person who is driving and stops at a particular road sign. If we ask him, “Why did you stop here?”, he might reply, “Because the signal says stop here”. Now, according to Wittgenstein, “one wrongly regards this statement as the statement of a cause whereas it is the statement of a reason. The cause may have been that he was long accustomed [*Gewöhnt*] to reacting to a certain signal in such-and-such a way, or his upbringing [*Erziehung*] could have been the cause” (VW: 107), or that “in his nervous system permanent connections of pathways developed such that the action follows the stimulus in the manner of a reflex or yet something else” (VW: 111). However, this person may have been mistaken in stating the cause, since the cause need not be known to him. What a person knows is a reason, that is, a rule. In this rich passage, custom as a process of habituation can be part of a causal explanation of a particular action, but it is actually also involved in the explanation in terms of reasons, for we give reasons by reference to particular rules which, as we have seen, have meaning as part of an established practice—a custom as *Gepflogenheit* or *Gebrauch*.

(2) The power of custom plays a fundamental role in thought and action, but it is also at the source of misleading ways of thinking. Just as a person who is accustomed to eating less than her fill is familiar with hunger and she reacts to any discomfort in the stomach by wanting to eat, even if the discomfort is due to the fact that she has already eaten too much, so by force of habit [*Gewohnheit*] “we are accustomed [*Gewöhnt*] to calm our mental disquiets by tracing certain propositions back to more fundamental ones” (VW: 75), even when this constitutes a useless remedy, as “when our disquiet arises from some unclarity about grammatical relations in some domain of language [...] and we feel sure that we have no use for a foundation in the down-to-earth sense of the term” (VW: 75). Similarly, custom is at the root of misleading analogies which are embedded in language itself and are implicitly at work in our thinking. Wittgenstein discusses these analogies mainly in the context of his critique of the mentalistic perspective on language and thought. For example, the misleading mentalistic idea that external expressions are signs of mental processes, as if every external expression must be related to an inner mental process to be meaningful, is connected by Wittgenstein to the fact that “we are accustomed [*Gewöhnt*] to speak of the colour of the face as a sign of fever” (RPP: I 292). Again, the more pragmatic perspective on thought as something common and *ordinary* meets with resistance because “we are accustomed to thinking of it as something ethereal and

unexplored, as if we were dealing with something whose exterior alone is known to us, and whose interior is yet unknown like our brain” (PG: §66). Because of this thinking habit, we are then inclined to see thought as a strange thing, but this habit is—we might say—the crystallization of a grammatical misunderstanding, that is, thinking that the lack of tangible substance corresponds to the substantive.²⁰ Similarly, Wittgenstein traces the appeal of a comprehensive referentialist account of language back to dysfunctional thinking habits. We think that a word in language stands for something because “we are accustomed—in an enormous number of cases—to words which can be explained straight away by pointing to certain objects” (WWL: 234).

(3) We are “accustomed to a certain way of looking at a phenomenon, which is laid down in our language” (WWL: 242), but sometimes we have to break the spell of custom, because when we become accustomed to a certain way of describing a thing, we are incapable of seeing it in another way (WWL: 162). However, “it is difficult to place the body differently from the way one is accustomed [*Gewohnt*] to see it” (RFM: III §54). Wittgenstein does not deal directly with the issue of changing habits, but I think that his remarks suggest that a deceptive thinking habit, in the form of a misleading analogy embedded in language, can be changed through custom itself, by replacing one particular thinking habit with another. The idea is to work with the analogy itself through a grammatical examination of how the words are used. In other words, “we shall also try to construct new notations, in order to break the spell of those which we are accustomed to” (BB: 23).

5. Conclusion

Although Wittgenstein does not directly discuss the philosophical notions of habit and custom—that is to say, he does not explicitly develop a particular philosophy of habit—the notions are essential conceptual tools of his “post-tractarian” philosophical method. As we have seen, he uses the notions of habit and custom both in his *pars destruens*—his anti-dogmatic and anti-mentalistic moves—and in his *pars construens*—a new anthropological perspective focused on the priority of practice and the relationship between concepts and human nature, richly considered.

In this paper I have offered a conceptual analysis that might shed some light on the rich Wittgensteinian use of the notions under discussion. In particular, by looking at some relevant occurrences of the notions in the original German text, and by mapping these occurrences into some significant uses, it can be concluded that Wittgenstein speaks of habit and custom in at least three ways:

1. The process of habituation by which people acquire, maintain and change particular habits and customs. This is custom as *Gewohnheit* and it has been analysed in the context of reflection on the power of custom. Furthermore, we have seen that Wittgenstein uses the term “*Gewohnheit*” also to refer to particular individual habits as recurring routine behaviours and particular collective habits as the traditions or mores of a particular culture, group or society. However, the latter have no normative import and their use does not correspond to particular philosophical contexts;

²⁰ For another example taken from mathematics, see PG: 371.

2. Common uses and practices within a particular system, culture or society, with normative import. This is custom as *Gebrauch* and it has been analysed in the context of Wittgenstein’s imaginative method;

3. Common practices as paradigms, established patterns of use and action with normative import. This is custom as *Gepflogenheit* and it has been analysed in the context of rule-following remarks.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that Wittgenstein’s rich use of these notions and the conceptual nuances derived from it can interact fruitfully with the main literature on habit, from the Aristotelian distinction between *hexis* and *ethos*—which seems to be at work in the double use of *Gewohnheit* as both particular habit and the process of habituation—to Dewey’s ecological characterization of habits and the idea of habituation as both the source of and remedy for dysfunctional habits. However, this topic goes beyond the aims of the present paper and will be addressed on another occasion.²¹

Abbreviations

- BB: *The blue and brown books* (1969) [1933–1935], ed. R. Rhees, second edition. Oxford: Blackwell.
- CV: *Culture and value: a selection from the posthumous remains* (1977/1998), ed. G.H. von Wright in collaboration with H. Nyman, revised edition of the text by A. Pichler, trans. P. Winch. Oxford: Blackwell.
- LFM: *Wittgenstein’s lectures on the foundations of mathematics, Cambridge, 1939* (1989), ed. C. Diamond. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LW I: *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology* (Vol 1) (1982) [1948–1949], ed. G.H. von Wright and H. Nyman, trans. C.G. Luckhardt and M.A.E. Aue. Oxford: Blackwell.
- OC: *On Certainty* (1974) [1951], ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.
- PG: *Philosophical Grammar* (1974) [1932–1934]. (1974), ed. R. Rhees, trans. A.J.P. Kenny. Oxford: Blackwell.
- PI: *Philosophical Investigations* (2009) [1938–1945], ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, fourth, revised edition by P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and J. Schulte. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- PPF: *Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment* (2009) [1946–1949], in PI (2009), 183–243 [Previously known as PI “Part II”].
- RFM: *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (1978) [1937–1944], ed. G.H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, third, revised, and reset edition. Oxford: Blackwell.

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- RPP I: *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (Vol. 1) (1980) [1945–1947], ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.
- RPP II: *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (Vol. 2) (1980) [1948], ed. G.H. von Wright and H. Nyman, trans. C.G. Luckhardt and M.A.E. Aue. Oxford: Blackwell.
- VW: *The Voices of Wittgenstein—The Vienna Circle, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Friedrich Waismann* (2003), ed. G.P. Baker, trans. G.P. Baker *et al.* London: Routledge.
- Z: *Zettel* (1967) [1945–1948], ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.
- WWL: *Wittgenstein's Whewell's Court Lectures, Cambridge, 1938–1941, from the Notes by Yorick Smythies* (2017), ed. V. Munz and B. Ritter. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

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