Wittgenstein as a Rebel:
Dissidence and Contestation in
Discursive Practices*

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Abstract
Through a new interpretation of Wittgenstein’s rule-following discussions, this article defends a negotiating model of normativity according to which normative authority is always subject to contestation. To refute both individualism and collectivism, I supplement Wittgenstein’s Private Language Argument with a Social Language Argument, showing that normativity cannot be monopolized either individually or socially (i.e. it cannot be privatized or collectivized). The negotiating view of normativity here developed lays the foundations of a politics of radical contestation which converges with Chantal Mouffe’s framework of ‘radical democracy’, while departing from her agonism in preserving the structuring and constraining role that tacit agreement in action plays in rule-following practices. My account of the ‘burdens of eccentricity’ elucidates how the normative force of dissidence can be properly recognized and used effectively for social transformations. I argue that there is a ‘presumption of normalcy’ in favour of the established consensus of action, but that this presumption is defeasible: in normative disagreements, a violation of expected normalcy shifts the burden onto the shoulders of rebellious agents who must show that their dissenting behaviour can be a legitimate extension, revision, or transformation of the practice in question.

Keywords: contestation; dissidence; normativity; intelligibility; Private Language Argument; Wittgenstein

Introduction
This paper tries to rethink the relation between consensus and dissent in Wittgenstein’s discussions of language and normativity. More specifically, my goal is to reclaim the crucial role of dissidence and contestation in those discussions, which has been disregarded and even denied by some of the major lines of interpretation and most influential appropriations of Wittgenstein’s philosophy: in particular, those of sceptics, antirealists, and pragmatists such as Saul Kripke, Paul Horwich, and Richard Rorty. This paper will argue against the collectivism that sceptics, antirealists, and...
pragmatists have read into the rule-following discussion and the Private Language Argument (hereafter PLA). These collectivist interpretations – I will argue – result in an impoverished reading of Wittgenstein’s discussions of normativity. But the goal of this paper is not merely (or even mainly) exegetical. My argument will try to extend Wittgenstein’s reflections on normativity. These reflections targeted primarily two philosophical misconceptions: the objectivism that reifies normativity in something impersonal (e.g. the idealized entities of Platonism), resulting in the problematic disappearance of the subject in normative issues; and the subjectivism that reifies normativity in private entities or episodes (e.g. the sense-data of empiricism or the mental images of psychologism), making the individual subject infallible, but also ultimately irrelevant for normative matters. But note that, as I will try to show, Wittgenstein’s reflections (including the PLA) do not deny individuals and their experiences all normative significance; rather, they simply denounce a misplaced over-emphasis on the individual, arguing against an individualistic normative inflation. In the same vein, I will contend that Wittgenstein’s reflections can be taken to be equally critical of a misplaced over-emphasis on the community, inviting an argument against a social (or collectivist) normative inflation. Wittgenstein’s critical remarks against individuality and privacy as normative foundations cannot be taken to give support to collectivism, for, as we will see, turning the community into a new unassailable normative foundation is equally unacceptable. As an extension of the PLA, I will argue that for the same reasons that normativity cannot be monopolized by individuals, it cannot be monopolized by communities either; for normativity is not the kind of thing that can be monopolized at all and, a fortiori, it cannot be monopolized either individualistically or socially. So, I will suggest that, along with the PLA, we can also have a Social Language Argument, that is, we can also derive from Wittgenstein’s reflections an argument against the normative hegemony of the community. This is an argument against uncontestable social meanings and social norms that cannot be disputed in principle, for that kind of uncontestability or indisputability – instead of making meanings and norms unassailable and securely grounded – actually results in the collapse of meaning and normativity. This insight about normativity has deep social and political implications, and it calls attention to the critical potential of Wittgenstein’s discussions of normativity for Social and Political Philosophy. This potential has only recently been tapped by political philosophers such as Chantal Mouffe and Wittgensteinians with a political orientation.

The Wittgensteinian elucidation of normativity that I develop here tries to contribute to this literature.

So my argument in this paper tries to show that the possibility of rebellion is a crucial element of normativity and that our normative practices rest on that possibility and are always in principle open to the contestation and renegotiation of standards. My goal is likely to seem implausible to many
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readers of Wittgenstein. In what sense can he be described as a rebel? Sure, his biography contains many rebellious moments. Perhaps this is rebellion in practice, but in theory? Perhaps this is rebellion in life, but in philosophy? The sceptical reader may grant that perhaps Wittgenstein was rebellious insofar as he went against the grain and tried to dismantle the philosophical establishment and end philosophy as we know it. But he did not seem to think that the task of the philosopher was contestation and rebellion, or even that philosophical reflection had the power to change things very much at all. After all, he wrote, famously, that ‘[philosophy] leaves everything as it is’ (PI §124). He seemed to have expressed nothing but contempt for philosophical attempts to transform the world. I am more than willing to grant all this; and I will bracket the issue of whether there is any hope for the transformative ambitions of the philosopher. What I want to argue is that contestation and rebellion occupy a very important place in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, more specifically, in his discussions of the normativity of our linguistic and rule-following practices in the Philosophical Investigations. Here too my claim is likely to be received with scepticism, and for good reasons. How can the Investigations be described as stressing the crucial role that contestation and rebellion have in our normative practices?

Wittgenstein’s philosophical elucidations of normativity seem to stress nothing but the harmonious practical consensus of the community. In his discussions of rule-following what he emphasizes is not contestation, but conformity; not disobedience, but obedience; not disagreement, but agreement. Indeed, he repeatedly calls attention to our agreement in judgments, in action, in form of life. In fact, he seems to give arguments that establish that we can only make sense of disagreement against the background of a tacit agreement, that we can only meaningfully disobey a rule because our act of disobedience is everywhere surrounded by conformity and blind obedience. This is true. Wittgenstein’s reflections on normativity make clear that disagreement is dependent upon and presupposes agreement. But this does not mean that agreement, conformity, and obedience have a kind of normative priority that disagreement, contestation, and disobedience do not have. In fact, the dialectical relation goes both ways. The relation of dependence is reciprocal; there is a relation of mutual dependence and support between agreement and disagreement; and, therefore, agreement too depends upon and presupposes disagreement, contestation, and the possibility of rebellion. I will try to show that Wittgenstein could have said the same things about disagreement that he said about agreement. Moreover, I will try to show that in fact he did say those things in his discussions of rule-following in the Investigations (although often in an indirect and implicit way).

Some preliminary remarks are in order. We need more than a mere departure from the norm in order to have contestation and rebellious
disobedience. For indeed regular violations of the norm are contemplated in the norm itself, which tells us what to do and what not to do. Therefore, regular departures from the norm (typically deemed mistakes or punishable violations) do not call it into question or contest it. What we need is departures from standard ways of following rules that go much deeper, that is, deviations that constitute normative disagreements because they challenge the accepted understanding of the norms of a practice. The focus of my discussion of contestation and rebellious disobedience will be a stubborn way of doing things differently which nonetheless claims to be the correct way of doing things. But it is important to point out as well that what I will be talking about is the practical contestation of normative standards, which may not be quite explicit or even conscious; it is contestation in action. This notion of practical contestation involves tacit challenges and implicit normative negotiations; it is not just a matter of entering claims and justifications, but also and more importantly, a matter of doing things differently and gradually gaining recognition or authority for this alternative way of doing things. It is important to note that this notion of practical contestation is temporally extended, and that the tacit normative negotiations that it involves can take place over many generations in the history of the practice.

I will develop my argument in two stages. In the first place, I will try to show that the capacity to dissent and contest normative assessments is a crucial element of our normative agency. This part of the argument tries to establish that our contesting powers underlie and support our normative behaviour (no matter how conformist this behaviour happens to be – even the most conservative kind of rule-following presupposes those powers of contestation). In the second place, I will try to show that the background consensus of our practices not only makes room but in fact requires the possibility of dissent and contestation, insofar as what counts as following a rule is never fixed once and for all, but is practically stabilized over time. There is a sense in which what counts as following the rule is always in contention, is always up for grabs, for it depends on those following the rule actually continuing to establish consensus in the same way, instead of challenging it. Hence the centrality of rebellious disobedience in our normative practices.

1 Dissidence: Contestability as the Crux of Normativity

On my interpretation, Wittgenstein’s arguments show that what is at the core of our normative behaviour is the capacity to dissent, and that the possibility of contestation and normative negotiation is a prerequisite for rule-following. Here a worry should arise immediately: doesn’t Wittgenstein discussion depict the rule-follower, first and foremost, as a blind conformist? He writes: ‘When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly’ (PI
Many commentators have emphasized the crucial importance that Wittgenstein gives to conformity with standard practice in his account of rule-following behaviour. And indeed, blind obedience occupies a special place in Wittgenstein’s discussion. Meredith Williams, for one, has argued that in Wittgenstein’s view blind obedience has priority over sighted rule-following because normative behaviour cannot start with the intuitions or recognitions of rules, but with actually conforming with standard ways of proceeding: establishing regularity in behaviour is a prerequisite for rule-following. In his discussions of learning Wittgenstein emphasizes that the initiate learner starts to display normative behaviour by acting in conformity with the accepted way of proceeding without questioning or even considering that way of acting. But this genetic priority, although it has normative implications, should not be elevated to the normative priority of a kind of blind obedience that is incapable of considering and challenging norms. If this is all we find in the rule-follower, we would say that his normative skills or powers are indeed quite limited and at least in some practices those limitations would prevent him from becoming a full member or master of the practice (in philosophical games or in political games, for example). Ultimately, I think that what Wittgenstein’s remarks on rule-following suggest is that neither complete blindness nor complete lucidity or sightedness can capture all the aspects of our normative behaviour, and that we should move beyond the dichotomy between blind obedience and sighted rule-following. Wittgenstein’s appeals to blind obedience play an important dialectical role against the Kantian model or any intellectualist model in which rule-following is a matter of acting from the conception of a rule. But similarly, his appeals to intuitions, decisions, or recognitions of normative standards play an important dialectical role against a behaviourist model of normativity that reduces rule-following to blind conformity to behavioural regularities. Neither intellectualism nor behaviourism will do because our normative activities are not reducible either to sighted rule-following or to blind obedience.

The rule-follower is more than a blind automaton not only because she can engage in lucid normative behaviour, but also and more importantly, because she can depart from established customs and accepted ways of proceeding, no matter how blindly this act of disobedience happens to be. What is important for my argument is that the rule-follower can depart from the consensus of action of the community, no matter how blindly or sightedly. I will try to show that the rule-following discussion and the PLA make clear that normative behaviour requires the possibility of practical disagreements or departures from standard practice, and that even when the emphasis is on agreement, the possibility of breaking this agreement or departing from it is always presupposed.

Even the famous passages in the *Investigations* that emphasize the role of agreement in our practices leave plenty of room for disagreement and lack
of accord with established practice. In §206, for example, Wittgenstein asks: ‘What if one person reacts in one way and another in another?’ He asks us to imagine ourselves in the position of an ‘explorer in an unknown country’ who encounters quite a bit of diversity in the normative behaviour of the natives. He writes: ‘In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on?’ At this point Wittgenstein remarks that ‘the common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language’. When there is no apparent agreement in action, we have to revert to very general human commonalities as our starting point. But Wittgenstein also refers to a more specific kind of agreement that supports the normativity of our language-games, namely, the agreement internal to a practice, the consensus of action shared only by the members of that practice. It is important to understand what kind of agreement this is and the normative role it plays.

Wittgenstein emphasizes in §241 that agreement doesn’t determine correctness, it doesn’t decide what is true and what is false. He remarks that ‘it is what human beings say that it is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in forms of life.’ So the taken-for-granted agreement is a precondition of the opinions we can articulate in our language-games, but it is not itself another opinion or a list of opinions; it is agreement in the language we use, in our habitual uses of language. And it is important to remember here that the earlier remarks on language in the Investigations emphasize that what is part of our language (what is included in it and what is excluded from it) is being constantly negotiated: new language-games appear, and they extend the limits of what we call language; other language-games die off and, with them, certain regions of language disappear. As Wittgenstein puts it, ‘new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten’ (PI §23). The agreement in the language we use has to be manufactured; and, presumably, in its historical construction we can witness this new agreement emerging out of disagreements, and in its historical demise we can witness each established agreement submerging into new disagreements. Linguistic agreements and disagreements, far from excluding each other, seem to be dialectically related. Our agreement in language is not a given but something that has to be fought for, something achieved over time in and through our negotiations. Moreover, agreement is something that, once achieved, still needs to be sustained and, if not properly sustained by our efforts, it can be lost. On Wittgenstein’s view, languages are historical formations, sets of practices with temporal trajectories that contain plenty of room for fluctuation. And, accordingly, our repertoire of linguistic habits is also historically developed and always open to change. This is what the analogy between language and an ancient city suggests.
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Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.

(PI §18)

Wittgenstein’s analogy shows how a discursive context, like a city, is formed by residues from the past which constitute archaeological strata that interact in complex ways and prefigure certain directions for the future, without determining the future shape that the context will take. As often pointed out in the literature, this analogy emphasizes the indeterminacy of a discursive context, which, like an urban space, always contains plenty of room for unpredictable changes, for developing new forms of edification and remodelling that cannot be anticipated. Nothing in an urban or a discursive context is fixed once and for all; the boundaries drawn in language are, like city limits, contingent and arbitrary.

The city analogy identifies different ways in which linguistic innovations can result from our agency. As Naomi Scheman (2002) puts it, ‘it is not only in the newly constructed outlying boroughs that change can occur; rather, moving around in the inner city in different ways can subtly reshape its face, even as we acknowledge the importance of the ancient and nondeliberate history embedded in the old walls and lanes’ (Scheman and O’Connor, 2002: p. 10). The multiplicity and heterogeneity of voices in our language-games are analogous to the enormous diversity of city-dwellers. Like the people who inhabit a city, the voices that populate a language-game are differently situated; and their localizations both constrain and enable their agency, affecting their interactions: depending on where you are, you can do certain things and not others. But these constraining and enabling conditions are always open to change. Just as the streets and roads of a city channel the traffic of city-dwellers in particular ways while allowing for changes of all kinds, the paths created by previous speakers constrain our discursive freedom of movement within the language-game without annuling the spontaneity of the players. In this way the city analogy highlights an important feature of discursive agency: its hybridity, its mixture of freedom and constraint, of spontaneity and control, of action and reaction. As voices move discursively through the maze of pathways inherited from previous voices, they unknowingly modify with their movements the discursive structures sedimented in linguistic practices. Like the activities of city-dwellers, our discursive activities acquire shape in and through the way they are conducted in our day-to-day interactions. On this view, there is a constant re-articulation of discursive practices, a constant re-structuration of discursive contexts through an agency that is always, at some level, unconscious and non-deliberate. For our speech acts and the changes they produce in our
practices are not driven by our conscious desires and intentions, but by life itself. No matter how much planning we put into the changes we want to produce or prevent, these changes are effected or thwarted only by means of situated performative chains, that is, by means of sequences of actions performed by embodied agents in very specific socio-economic and historical contexts. The situatedness of language-users and rule-followers (as that of city-dwellers) is not (at least not entirely) of their own choosing; and neither is the efficacy of their agency. This is not, of course, to deny that changes can be quite deliberate and calculated: there is such a thing as urban planning; and Wittgenstein does mention ‘new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses’. But even the most careful and meticulous planning cannot fully control its genesis and performative deployment and eliminate all unknowingness; that is, it cannot bring discursive agency under full control, managing how the impetus for change is formed, developed, and carried out in actions. There is always a level of unknowingness in our discursive agency. There are always interests and needs that go unrecognized. There are always implications and ramifications that cannot be predicted. In language-use, as in city life, there are always new possibilities for interaction cropping up. Discursive spaces – no matter how well sedimented and rigidified they may become – always contain a certain degree of openness and vulnerability to change; they can always (at least in principle) be questioned, challenged, and destabilized, leaving room for critical transformations.

Given this historical conception of our discursive practices and linguistic habits, our agreement in language should be thought of as historically extended and as remaining always open to challenges and transformations. And the open and changeable nature of our background consensus does affect the normativity of our practices: its fallibility, its lack of finality. Our normative assessments are never final and unrevisable. The correctness of our linguistic actions can always be challenged; our moves in language-games can always be normatively assessed in different ways. This openness to contestation is grounded in the openness to correction of our normative agency. Our language-games are not composed of moves whose correctness can be guaranteed once and for all; they are not activities that can be exempted from critical scrutiny. In other words, language-games are not self-justifying activities with absolute normative autonomy.

Even in language-games that have the appearance of incorrigibility, such as avowals of sensations (e.g. ‘I see red’ or ‘I am in pain’), even there, Wittgenstein argues that the possibility of contestation and correction is essential for that language-game to maintain its normativity. Because without contestability and the possibility of normative negotiations between different parties, the normativity of the game becomes empty, a shallow appearance. This is a crucial part of the so-called PLA. This argument concerns not only the problematic impossibility of agreement between the
private linguist and others, but also and more importantly, the troublesome impossibility of disagreement with the private linguist, the impossibility of challenging and contesting his normative assessments and normative claims. Because the pronouncements of the private linguist are not answerable to any challenge, they cannot be justified in a genuine sense. This unchallengeability or uncontestability is what reveals that the normativity of a private language is empty or illusory, a mere appearance. In §268 Wittgenstein writes:

I tell someone I’m in pain. His attitude to me will then be that of belief, disbelief, suspicion, and so on. Let us assume he says: ‘It’s not so bad.’

At this point the defender of the private language of sensation who wants to reject the possibility of that contestation can appeal to a subjective justification. That is, the private linguist who doesn’t accept that his claims can be challenged can convince himself of their correctness by pointing to the pain in question internally and giving himself what Wittgenstein calls ‘a private exhibition’. But he argues that this won’t do. He points out that we can understand ‘an exhibition of the difference between a broken and an unbroken tooth’, and this public exhibition can be used to resolve disputes. But a private exhibition of the difference between a genuine pain and a merely apparent one won’t do the job of reassuring the subject that he cannot possibly be mistaken. The difference between a public and a private exhibition is that the former but not the latter has normative force for, and can be accepted by, all parties in the dispute. And in a private exhibition veridicality (the authenticity of the object being exhibited) cannot be guaranteed. Wittgenstein rejects the notion of a ‘subjective justification’ that can give internal support and a self-sufficient secure foundation to a private language. The kind of subjective, private grounding that the speaker of a newly invented language tries to give to the use of her terms (for example, in writing in her diary about the reoccurrence of ‘S’) fails, for, as Wittgenstein puts it, ‘whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we cannot talk about “right”’ ($\S$258). What the PLA shows is that practices cannot be self-justifying: a rule-following activity cannot have complete normative autonomy and guarantee its own correctness, being exempted from challenge and critique. But note that this is neutral as to whether the practice’s alleged autonomy and self-justifying ground are individual or social. As Simon Blackburn already pointed out in ‘The Individual Strikes Back’ (1984), we could say to the community the same thing that Wittgenstein said to the isolated individual confined to his privacy: for you to have any normativity at all, you need to be corrigible. That is, for the community to have normative activities, the community as a whole has to be open to correction: its normative assessments have to be vulnerable to challenges and in principle open to contestation; we have to
be able to make sense of collective mistakes: it must be possible to draw a
distinction between what seems right to the community and what is right. This mirror image of the PLA – the SLA (the Social Language Argument) – is a powerful argument against collectivism and against collectivist readings of Wittgenstein. Fortunately there is another way of reading Wittgenstein’s normative discussions.

The PLA unmasks the illusion of absolutely autonomous or self-grounding practices. When an individual (such as Wittgenstein’s private linguist) indulges in this illusion and claims to have a private rule-following activity that is self-justifying, we should respond: normativity cannot be privatized. But when a community indulges in a collectivist version of this illusion, we should reply: normativity cannot be collectivized. The more general point being that normativity cannot be monopolized, either individually or socially; it cannot be claimed to be contained within a self-justifying activity of any kind. An activity cannot have itself as its own measure of correctness, for, as Wittgenstein puts it, having oneself as the only measure of correctness is like vindicating the validity of what is reported in a newspaper by checking it against multiple copies of the same newspaper (§265). We can pretend that our uses of language are self-justifying. For example, Wittgenstein asks us to imagine someone saying ‘But I know how tall I am! I am this tall!’, while ‘laying his hand on top of his head to prove it’ (§279). But on closer examination, that kind of autonomous normativity turns out to be mere show; the performance is an empty gesture. When everything is correct, when there is no such thing as the possibility of making a mistake, that means that we cannot draw a distinction between correct and incorrect in the practice and at that point normativity has disappeared: it has collapsed. Thus absolute autonomy, instead of securing correctness, actually destroys it; instead of making normativity unassailable, it annihilates it. And note that the illusion of normative autonomy can be entertained both privately and collectively: just as the individual can illusorily claim indefeasible correctness, so can a social group. The latter has been masterfully illustrated by George Orwell in 1984. Orwell’s novel describes how social arrangements can create the illusion of normativity, while in fact normative assessments have become empty, for whatever seems right to the party (or to the state) is right; and we should repeat here, with Wittgenstein, that ‘that only means that here we cannot talk about “right”’ (§258). The social monopoly of the standards of correctness (just like the private one) makes normativity collapse and disappear, and normative claims and assessments become mere empty gestures.

There is no self-grounding ground. There are no self-justifying practices with complete normative autonomy. The lesson to be learned here is that correctness cannot be monopolized. The argument against the privatization of normativity is part of a bigger argument against any kind of monopoly of normativity, whether the alleged monopoly is in the hands of the individual
or in the hands of the community. Correctness cannot be fixed and self-supported by any monopolizing agency (whether individual or collective). A kind of correctness that cannot fail turns out not to be correctness at all. This is the self-undermining character of infallible and unchallengeable foundations: ironically, the unassailable foundations that were sought in order to protect and secure the normativity of the practice actually make this normativity collapse and disappear into an empty shell or mere appearance. And note that this happens whenever there is an attempt to monopolize normativity, that is, whenever someone or something claims to be the sole possessor of normativity, the ultimate source and arbiter of correctness – whether it is an individual or a community. In this sense the PLA undermines not only individualism but also collectivism; or at least, in attacking the private monopolization of normativity, this argument gives us also the tools and resources to resist the social monopolization of correctness by groups and institutions, offering the blueprint for what I have called the Social Language Argument.

If individualism makes the mistake of making the language-user and rule-follower fully autonomous, collectivism makes the opposite mistake of making the individual fully heteronomous by locating the sovereign source of normativity not in the individual, but entirely outside her, in the community. On this collectivist view, there are no normative negotiations among individuals, or between the individual and the community. On this view, there is nothing to negotiate because normativity has been fixed; what is correct and incorrect has been decided by the community. While the performance of individual rule-followers cannot guarantee its own correctness, this performance cannot have the measure of its correctness entirely outside itself either. If nothing whatsoever in the agency of the individual can engage with the normative standards applied to his actions, there is a purely external relation of accord or conformity with these standards. Wittgenstein certainly resists the identification of normative behaviour with autonomous rule-following or acting from the conception of a rule; but that doesn’t mean that he externalizes normativity and finds the foundations of the normative behaviour of the individual entirely outside the individual’s actions. As we saw, there are reasons to be critical not only of the intellectualist model of lucid rule-following but also of the behaviourist model of blind rule-conforming. Wittgenstein rejects the two poles of complete autonomy and complete heteronomy in the behaviour of the rule-follower. Our normative agency as individuals is not self-contained and self-sufficient, but it must contain active elements and it must be capable of making contributions to the normativity of the practices in which it participates. More specifically, the normative agency of an individual must contain certain critical skills that make it possible for the individual to accept or reject normative assessments; that is, it must contain the capacity to challenge and contest normative assessments and to engage in normative negotiations.
On Wittgenstein’s view, there is no room for normative sovereignty in our practices, whether in the hands of the individual or in the hands of the community; there are no sovereign and autonomous powers that can control the normative life of a practice. Insofar as it is a normative activity, a language-game must contain the possibility of normative resistance, that is, of normative contestations that can in principle affect the normative structure of the practice and transform the rules of the game as they are performatively enacted by participants. The importance of contestability in our language-games cannot be overemphasized. Contestability is always presupposed in our normative negotiations. These negotiations can take place in all kinds of ways: overtly or covertly, consciously or unconsciously, in a transformative or conformist way; and they constitute the performative support that sustains the normative structure of a practice. Precisely because the norms of a practice are established performatively, there are always continuing processes of stabilization and destabilization of these norms carried out through the performances of agents diversely located within the practice and at the (often shifting) borders of the practice. These processes of stabilization and destabilization of norms are open and never-ending. And in these processes the interplay between similarities and differences in ways of acting is crucial because it shapes the performative development of the practice. On the side of stabilization we have performative repetitions of similarities and the performative domestication of differences. On the side of destabilization we have performative differences of all sorts, sometimes cropping up in unexpected ways, sometimes developing in a concerted effort at subversion. And these performative differences that are always present (even if they appear only as stylistic differences) may or may not be disruptive and transformative depending on how they are integrated in the historical development of the practice in question or of alternative practices around it. What both individualism and collectivism do is to foreclose these possibilities of disruption and transformation, and to deem critical engagements and normative negotiations pointless if not impossible, by fixing the normative structure of our practices once and for all through the autonomous and sovereign normative authority either of the individual or of the community. But this can’t be done, not in human normative practices as we know them. Just as Wittgenstein’s discussions suggest that there cannot be a radically private language-game (private in principle, not just in practice) because the rules of the game collapse when what the individual counts as correct and incorrect cannot be contested, by the same reasoning, we can see that there cannot be a radically unanimous language-game (unanimous in principle, not just in practice) because normativity collapses when the normative judgments of the community become inescapable and have to be accepted as fate.

The novelty of my interpretation of the PLA is the focus on uncontestability as the crux of the argument: it is the impossibility of disagreement
with the private linguist that makes the normativity of her language collapse, revealing it to be spurious. Where can this interpretation be situated within the vast literature on the PLA? There have been four main lines of interpretation of the PLA. First, the verificationist or behaviourist reading was initially a popular interpretation among logical positivists and members of the Vienna Circle. This reading focused exclusively on the requirement of publicity and the criteria of verifiability for language-use. This interpretation of his philosophy seemed to have been repudiated by Wittgenstein himself (see especially PI §§307–8); and it has not had many advocates in recent decades. Secondly, the social reading of the PLA goes beyond issues of publicity and verifiability and construes it as an argument for language as a social (and not merely public) phenomenon that requires social habits, customs, and traditions.

Thirdly, there have been two different sceptical readings of the PLA (as well as the rule-following discussion): a substantive sceptical reading that attributes to Wittgenstein negative theses about knowledge in relation to meaning and normativity (i.e. that we cannot know what we mean, or that we cannot know what counts as correct); and a Pyrrhonian sceptical reading according to which what the PLA does is not to argue that knowledge of meaning or correctness cannot be attained, but rather to show that knowledge is not the issue, that private certainty – or social certainty, for that matter, I would add – is not what gives a normative foundation to language. And fourthly, the 1990s saw the emergence of a deflationary or quietist reading of the PLA pioneered by Cora Diamond (1991), who argued for a resolute reading of Wittgenstein’s philosophy as exclusively therapeutic, as an activity that undoes philosophical illusions and does not advance any philosophical thesis of its own. Diamond and her followers – the advocates of the so-called New Wittgenstein – have argued against substantive readings of the PLA according to which the argument establishes substantive theses against privacy or for sociality. On the resolute reading of the therapeutic interpretation of Diamond and her followers, the PLA deflates philosophical arguments and theses about privacy without offering any substantive thesis of its own (whether positive – about publicity or sociality – or negative – about the limits of human knowledge). My own interpretation of the PLA can be read as in line with the deflationary reading, but offering an important extension of it, which shows that the PLA has a wider application than previously thought. My interpretation encourages us to think of the PLA as an internal critique of inflated notions of privacy; but it shows that the PLA, insofar as it is a reflection on uncontestability, that is, on the paradoxical consequences of the impossibility of disagreement, has also force against inflated notions of sociality – where the philosophical illusion is the impossible disagreement, not with the private linguist, but with the community.

My interpretation is also compatible with a Pyrrhonian way of approaching Wittgenstein’s later philosophy (although not with a substantive sceptical
reading à la Kripke), and also with a moderate social reading (although not with strong substantive claims about sociality or publicity – i.e. social constructivist or behaviourist readings). How can my interpretation be simultaneously an extension of the deflationary, the Pyrrhonian, and the social reading? As some commentators have argued recently, it is highly questionable that we could or should identify a single correct way of reading Wittgenstein’s reflections. On the one hand, there are heterogeneous elements and tensions within these complex and multilayered reflections. On the other hand, it should not be surprising that these reflections could be taken in different directions given that they can be applied to different targets and thus amount to different arguments. On my interpretation, insofar as the PLA is an argument against the foundational role of certainty in a linguistic practice, it is a Pyrrhonian argument; insofar as it is an argument against individualism and privacy as the normative foundation of language, it is a social argument – i.e. an argument that underscores the social dimension of language; and finally, insofar as it is an argument that deflates philosophical illusions, it is a deflationary argument. My interpretation adds that Wittgenstein’s argument against inflated notions of privacy is simultaneously an argument against inflated notions of sociality, for this argument uncovers the paradoxes underlying any normative appeal to any foundation that is uncontestable, be it the judgment of the individual or that of the community: if disagreement in a language-game becomes impossible, the normativity of the language-game is rendered spurious (whether the possibility of disagreement deemed out of bounds is with the private linguist or with the linguistic community).

2 Interlude: The Individual Strikes Back, Once Again!

But the critic can come back with the following reply which resuscitates individualism in a new way. The reply goes as follows: this reading of the rule-following discussion and the PLA as putting the emphasis on the possibility of resistance and contestation seems to require only a plurality of perspectives or normative standpoints, but not necessarily sociality. One can negotiate with oneself if one is capable of adopting diverse points of view; one can challenge oneself and become answerable to oneself if one has enough internal diversity. Think, for example, of the radical case of Multiple Personality Disorder, in which a subject can experience a clash between radically opposed normative standpoints to the point of becoming non-functional and unable to resolve the conflicts that arise in his normative deliberations. Normal subjects may not be fractured in this radical way and they may not have radically different normative standpoints available to them. But, even without radical fractures, we all have internal differences and have experienced tensions in our thought and evaluations. We all have experiences of our internal monologue as polyphonic, as a soliloquy that
sometimes becomes diversified or split into different voices that do not necessarily exhibit normative unity and are not always easy to harmonize (and even if they are not at war with each other, we feel torn and plunged into conflict by them). Literature certainly offers a multitude of examples of perfectly sane and rational individuals whose streams of consciousness are so diversified or split (Henry James’s novels exemplify this brilliantly).

In one sense, this reply is correct: the PLA by itself doesn’t prove that sociality is a requirement for our normative activities. But although the PLA doesn’t do that by itself, it does do that in combination with other discussions that we can find in Wittgenstein’s latter writings, namely, his discussions of learning and the formation of the subject through socialization. These discussions reveal that people become subjects and participants in normative practices through enculturation and that they develop their inner diversity and distinctive points of view in interaction with others. So, on my view, there are still good reasons in favour of the social reading of Wittgenstein’s view of normativity, but the argument for this reading cannot be restricted to the PLA; it has to be put in a wider context, namely, the context of the discussion of the sociohistorical formation of normative practices and of the agents who participate in them. In the context of these discussions, we can say that one can negotiate with oneself, but that negotiation – if sealed off from any other – would not have the same normative significance because it would not contain full-blown contestability. In §268 Wittgenstein asks ‘Why can’t my right hand give money to my left hand?’ In a certain sense it can, if by ‘giving money’ we mean moving coins or bills from one hand to another. But of course, as Wittgenstein points out, this action would not have ‘the practical consequences’ of a gift.

3 Consensus, Contestation, and Normative Negotiations

My argument in section 1 showed that we need room for normative disagreements, for disputes and negotiations, not only at the level of dissenting individuals who can challenge each other, but at all levels, including the level of entire communities and their consensus of action. What has to be countered is not only the stubborn and pretentious individual rule-follower who may have the vain ambition of monopolizing the normativity of a practice; what has to be neutralized is also the attempt of the community to monopolize normativity. What has to be rejected, in short, is any attempt to find the ultimate source of normativity, the fixed and unquestionable foundations of a practice. However, the defender of collectivism will say that at the social level we do hit bedrock, we reach a level where we have to stop: the community and its agreement in action constitute that bedrock; they provide the normative foundations of our practices, and we cannot make sense of negotiations at this level; we don’t know what it would mean to question this foundational level. In this section I will try to refute this critical
response and the interpretation of Wittgenstein on which it relies. I will do so by articulating a *negotiating model of normativity* through an examination of the dialectical relation between agreement and disagreement. I will try to show that when Wittgenstein appeals to the agreements in action, in judgments, and in forms of life of the community, these communal agreements should not be understood as excluding disagreements, dissent, and contestation. In order to show this, I will defend a particular interpretation of the Wittgensteinian notion of agreement, a *fallibilistic* and *pluralistic* interpretation according to which the tacit, background agreements of our practices are neither final nor homogeneous. And note that I am not denying the crucial normative significance of agreement. I am simply arguing that the crucial normative role that agreement plays in our practices *does not exclude the possibility of disagreement but actually requires it*: the applicability of shared standards of correctness requires that practitioners know what it would mean to depart from those standards, to disagree with accepted criteria of correctness, and that they know how to handle such disagreements.

It is important to note that contestability will figure differently in different practices. My rejection through Wittgenstein’s arguments of normative absolutism does not entail relativism or subjectivism, that is, a blank and unqualified thesis about contestability. My view is *not that everything can always be contested*, but rather, that a normative practice will always include the *possibility* of normative disagreement and *some form of contestability*. Of course, this does not entail that contestability can always be exercised in every practice by everyone. In some normative activities, such as arithmetic or logic, the burdens of dissent and contestation are so high that they are impossible to meet for a novice in the practice; and, therefore, the normative departure becomes a ground for questioning competence in the practice. Someone rejecting ‘$2 + 2 = 4$’, for example, automatically becomes a reasonable ground for suspecting the subject’s adding skills and her ability to understand arithmetical symbols. As we saw, rigidly structured and regimented normative activities typically require blind obedience on the part of the novices before these initiate learners can be granted competence. But at the same time even in these activities the contestation of normative principles is not rendered impossible: once one’s mastery in the practice has been established and under special circumstances, one can – at least in principle – dissent from well-entrenched beliefs and normative principles if one can assume the burden of showing how things can be done otherwise, without abiding by those beliefs and principles.

The stronger our normative departures, the more demanding the burdens we need to assume in order to remain within the practice and to make our dissent intelligible. Any dissenter will assume a certain burden, but the burdens of dissent can range from a minimal adjustment or qualification of a norm in the case of a minor normative departure to the redoing of the
whole practice in the case of radical and pervasive contestation. The burden of a radical dissent can go as high as the burden of showing a restructuring of the entire practice that can accommodate the normative deviation: for example, the development of an alternative logic or an alternative arithmetic. And dissenters may face burdens that they are unable to assume, rendering their dissent unproductive and even unintelligible for the time being. In some cases, entire generations of practitioners may fail to see how the burdens of a particular form of dissent could possibly be meaningfully assumed and met, but that is not enough to conclude that the normative limits of contestation into which they have run are fixed and insurmountable limits. In fact, history has taught us that some of the most unthinkable forms of dissent in a practice could become the axis of the most productive transformations of the practice; and new versions of the practice in which the burdens of that radical dissent are successfully met are eventually developed. But, of course, not all practices admit the same degree of contestability: normative disagreement and contestation figure differently in different practices. (The normative role of dissent in democratic political deliberation, for example, is not as restricted as it is in other discursive practices.) My contention is simply that normativity requires in principle contestability and that full-blown normative skills require the ability to dissent and to contest norms: even in those activities that rely most heavily on normative consensus (such as arithmetic or logic), more than mere blind obedience is required for acquiring full normative competence in the practice. To repeat my claim in section 1, if blind obedience is all we find in a rule-follower, we would say that his normative skills or powers are indeed quite limited and at least in some practices those limitations would prevent him from becoming a full member or master of the practice.

3(a) Consensus and Dissent: There is No Finality in our Tacit Agreements in Action

An important misconception in the literature on Wittgenstein is the idea that agreement can fix meaning and determine correctness in discursive practices. On Wittgenstein’s view, the semantic content of words is not decided by the consensus of language-users. His view is not that our words mean whatever the linguistic community chooses. This naïve semantic conventionalism or collectivism would make meanings utterly arbitrary; and, therefore, this view is open to a social version of the Humpty-Dumpty objection of semantic emptiness, namely: when a word means whatever we want it to mean, it does not mean anything in particular, because anything whatever can be or not be part of its meaning if the community so decides. On this collectivist view, linguistic communities have an absolute and arbitrary discretion and are not bound by anything. This semantic collectivism is a social behaviourism that depicts speakers
as clonal Humpty-Dumptys rocking back and forth on their wall and babbling in unison. But, on Wittgenstein’s view, the meaning of words is not whatever is agreed upon by their users. The relation between meaning and agreement is more indirect: agreement in practice is the *background condition* for the emergence of meaning. This relation is analogous to the relation between agreement and correctness as explained by Wittgenstein. As we saw, he argues that a tacit agreement in action is the requisite background for our normative assessments, but that does not mean that agreement decides correctness (see *PI §241*). On Wittgenstein’s view, correctness is not a matter of decision, whether individual or collective. Our tacit agreement in action does not determine the correctness of our claims, but it is the precondition for our ability to assess correctness. And the same thing is true of meaning, which should not be surprising since semantic normativity is a species of the genus normativity: the background agreement in linguistic behaviour is a precondition for semantic assessments, but it does not determine the outcomes of our semantic evaluations. A complete failure in the coordination of action among the participants in a language-game would dissolve the game, making it impossible to identify the moves in the game and to assess their significance and correctness. It is in this sense that our normative assessments depend on our tacit agreement in action, without being determined by it. There is always room for disagreements in our assessments; but these disagreements always take place against the background of a practical agreement that restricts the normative standpoints that can enter into the process of negotiation at any given point. Our normative negotiations are *constrained but not determined* by the tacit agreement of our practices. No matter how deep it runs, the background consensus of action that sustains our practices can always (at least in principle) be revisited and challenged; it always remains open to the possibility of contestation. However, we do reach bedrock in our normative negotiations. There are points in the process of contestation at which we have to say ‘This is simply what we do.’ But this is *not a final point* that constitutes an ultimate and insurmountable normative limit. In this sense it has been a mistake to assimilate Wittgenstein’s view of normativity to pragmatism and to interpret the bedrock of action underlying our practices as secure foundations for our normative activities. Wittgenstein is not providing a consensus theory of normativity. As I read him, the actions and reactions that constitute the bedrock of our practices in their present form are simply *contingent stopping-points* that we don’t know how to negotiate: as of today, our negotiations stop there and we don’t know how to go any further; but this doesn’t mean that these are fixed and unmovable points that are beyond challenge and contestation in principle; it is not that they have a special status because of their intrinsic normative force that makes them unchallengeable. With changing conditions and changing practices,
even these bedrock actions and reactions can become subject to contestation and an integral part of the process of negotiation, rather than its limit.

In this sense I agree with Stanley Cavell’s critique of certain pragmatist interpretations of Wittgenstein in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*. There Cavell argues that the bedrock judgments ‘This is simply what I do’ or ‘This is simply what we do’ are an expression of *impotency*, that is, of our inability to go any further. But Cavell argues that this impotency is ‘expressed as potency’ in those judgments, that is, it is presented as a choice or a decision, as a refusal to go any further (Cavell, 1991: p. 21). On this reading, bedrock judgments are ways of bringing our normative negotiations, or as Cavell puts it, our ‘conversation’, to a close. And the important point is that we have to take responsibility, both individually and collectively, for bringing the conversation to a close. In *The Democratic Paradox* Chantal Mouffe follows Cavell and elaborates on his view of responsibility. As Mouffe puts it, Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein shows us that ‘bringing a conversation to a close is always a personal choice, a decision which cannot be simply presented as mere application of procedures and justified as the only move that we could make in those circumstances’ (2000: p. 75); ‘we should never refuse bearing responsibility for our decisions by invoking the commands of general rules or principles’ (2000: p. 76). Mouffe draws from this important implications for political theory, laying the foundations for a radical democratic theory, for – as she puts it – the ‘insistence on the need to leave the conversation on justice for ever open establishes the basis for a project of “radical and plural democracy”’ (2000: p. 76). I want to say the same about our conversation on normativity: that it remains for ever open and that this establishes a radical notion of normative resistance or contestability. There is no absolute finality in our normative contestations and negotiations, and this lack of finality is the basis for radical notions of responsibility and contestability. The impossibility of shaking off responsibility once and for all is intimately related to the normative openness of our agency, and it gives support to the thesis that our normative claims and assessments remain for ever open to critical resistance: that is, they exhibit a *radical openness to contestation and negotiation*, in principle if not in practice. And this *de iure* radical contestability and its companion notion of radical responsibility operate both at the individual and at the collective level. My negotiating model of normativity suggests that individual and collective responsibility are inter-related and yet exceed each other in such a way that they cannot be conflated or reduced to one another. Individual responsibility cannot be completely relieved to the point of being excused by reducing it to collective responsibility; but the latter cannot be suppressed by hiding the normative force of social structures and institutions behind the agency of particular individuals. We cannot excuse individuals from responsibility by
putting the normative burden of their actions on the community to which they belong; and, for the same reasons, we cannot excuse communities from responsibility by putting the normative burden of collective actions on the shoulders of the individuals who contribute to them or perpetrate them.

I follow Cavell and Mouffe in understanding Wittgenstein’s philosophy not as a quest for certainty but as a quest for responsibility. However, I take issue with Cavell’s and Mouffe’s description of our ‘reaching bedrock’ (i.e. a fragile and defeasible moment of finality in our normative negotiations) as a personal choice or a decision, for these terms contain elements of individuality, consciousness, intentionality, and freedom which may or may not be there. Reaching bedrock may also be something collective, unconscious, and not deliberatively chosen. But the important Cavellian and Mouffean point with which I fully agree is the one that emphasizes the lack of absolute finality in our normative negotiations and establishes a radical notion of responsibility: we have to take responsibility for our inability to go any further, for reaching stopping-points in our normative negotiations, even if they are not of our own choosing and even if they tend to be hidden from view and unconscious. It is our individual and collective responsibility as members of a practice to identify the limits of our negotiating powers, to make our most basic normative actions and reactions open to view and thus, in principle, open to critical scrutiny and possible contestations, even if we cannot yet foresee how they can be meaningfully challenged. But, as noted above, radical contestability will figure differently in different practices. For dissent is handled differently from practice to practice and the normative space for contestation can vary quite dramatically across normative activities, ranging from those whose normativity is built upon an omnipresent possibility of dissent (such as the discursive practices of democratic political deliberation) to those activities that are structured around strong constraints on dissent and contestability (such as elementary arithmetic). The individual and collective responsibilities concerning normative agreements and disagreements will therefore change from practice to practice, and they can only be elucidated through a piecemeal, contextual analysis.

It is clear that in his exchanges with the sceptic both in the *Investigations* and in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein emphasizes that in our practices we cannot question everything. Not everything is questionable in our normative activities; some things must be agreed upon; but this doesn’t mean that there are certain things that are unquestionable, that our agreements in action have inviolable normative force and constitute fixed normative foundations in virtue of their inviolability. These solidified practical agreements are in principle open to future challenges and contestations, even if such contestability is not de facto possible today given the state of our practices or the state of their surrounding conditions.
3(b) Consensus and Diversity: There is No Homogeneity in our Tacit Agreements in Action

The consensus of action on which our discursive practices or language-games are based is not something that simply happens, but something that is achieved by a long history of efforts on the part of individual speakers, of particular linguistic communities, and even of the entire species in its adaptation to its natural surroundings. These efforts have to be constantly sustained in order to maintain the required tacit agreement, whose achievement is always in progress. And they are typically not intentional efforts, not even necessarily (perhaps not even often) conscious efforts. We need to examine how tacit agreements in action are produced by human agency. Wittgenstein sketches an account of the formation and preservation of practical agreement at two distinct levels: a phylogenetic level that concerns how the coordination of action is established in human communities through biological and cultural processes of evolution and adaptation; and an ontogenetic level, which concerns how people are brought into a consensus of action during their life-time. These levels correspond, respectively, to Wittgenstein’s remarks on ‘natural history’ and his remarks on learning.

Our normative activities are made possible – but not determined – by our agreement in action. The contingency of the relation between normativity and agreement is part of what Wittgenstein tries to convey by calling our attention to the phylogenetic and ontogenetic development of our practices and their consensus of action. On the one hand, at the phylogenetic level, Wittgenstein repeatedly argues that the facts of our ‘natural history’ could have been different and, accordingly, our language-games and our concepts would have been different (see *PII*, p. 230; *RPP I* §46). Similarly, he also suggests that differences in learning histories are reflected in normative and conceptual differences, with different training processes resulting in different conceptual structures and normative attitudes. Just as the historical evolution of the species and the linguistic community constrains the significance of our utterances and actions, the historical development of the individual also constrains the meanings that can be ascribed to what she says and does. Without falling into a social determinism, Wittgenstein’s remarks on learning emphasize the constraining effect of the ontogenetic development of our agreement in action.

There is a lot of diversity in the history of species, of communities, and of individuals. However, this wild diversity is domesticated in many ways. Many differences are sacrificed for the sake of forging commonalities. But not all differences are eliminated in the creation of similarities; many differences are simply relegated to the background and rendered invisible or at least not salient. Wittgenstein’s discussions underscore the inner diversity of our practices and the communities that support them. This inner diversity
also suggests an intimate relation between agreement and disagreement underlying our practices and communities. It is important to note that a consensus that is not reached through, and against the background of, dissent (whether actual or only potential dissent) would be a homogeneous consensus that excludes differences, rendering everything the same in the language-game (the players of the game, the way they play the game, their assessments of game moves, etc.). But Wittgenstein’s appeals to communal agreements do not suggest this kind of uniformity and homogeneity. In fact, I contend that Wittgenstein actually rejects this kind of Absolute Agreement, just as he rejects Absolute Disagreement as something that makes normative activities impossible. As I have conceded from the beginning, Wittgenstein’s remarks about our consensus of action and agreements in form of life do suggest that radical and pervasive disagreements at all levels destroy normative behaviour and render normative assessments impossible. The lack of any agreement whatsoever involves the collapse of a rule-following activity: behaviour becomes anomic, its assessment random and arbitrary, and we no longer have an activity in which we can talk about things being done correctly or incorrectly. But the rejection of Absolute Disagreement is not an affirmation of Absolute Agreement. It doesn’t follow from the claim that a normative practice cannot get off the ground in the midst of complete heterogeneity that such a practice requires complete homogeneity. In fact, I cannot think of anything more antithetical to Wittgenstein’s view than the idea that our rule-following practices require (or even typically exhibit) complete uniformity and homogeneity. It is worth pointing out that Wittgenstein rejects the idea of homogeneous sameness as a philosophical fiction. He argues that what we find in our language-games is not absolute sameness but similarities of different kinds which have a history and are open to fluctuation (‘a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing’; PI §66). And these are similarities that appear and operate in the midst of differences. Wittgenstein’s remarks about agreement should be read with this in mind. The agreements in action that support our practices bring to the fore certain similarities in our ways of acting, but they don’t exclude or erase differences; on the contrary, they leave plenty of room for differences and deviations. These agreements are perfectly compatible with lack uniformity and homogeneity.

There is always an irreducible heterogeneity of perspectives and ways of acting in our normative practices. No matter how regular and well-coordinated these perspectives and ways of acting happen to be, they can never be fully unified in a single perspective without internal diversity, that is, into a single, uncontested, and uncontestable voice or standpoint without resistance from other voices or standpoints. But it is important to emphasize here again that different practices admit different degrees of heterogeneity, depending on how they handle normative differences and dissent. Although complete homogeneity (or complete heterogeneity, for
that matter) cannot be found in rule-following activities because Absolute Agreement (like Absolute Disagreement) destroys normativity, different practices handle diversity or heterogeneity differently, creating normative orders that require more or less homogeneity, excluding differences and domesticating normative deviations more or less forcefully. Homogeneity and heterogeneity, like agreement and disagreement, are always bound up with each other and do not exist in pure form; they always come in degrees. There is no such thing as absolute homogeneity or heterogeneity in our practices: different practices definitely admit different degrees of homogeneity and heterogeneity (here again, think of the vast differences on this score between arithmetic and democratic political deliberation).

The emphasis on the heterogeneity of our practices and the openness of the agreements that support them should not hide or disguise existing forms of exclusion in our practices. The tacit consensus of action and the community of rule-followers it founds involve relations of inclusion and exclusion. No matter how open, heterogeneous, and pluralistic our consensus and its resulting community happen to be, they always include certain people and exclude others. But these relations of inclusion and exclusion can (and typically do) fluctuate. The boundaries established by a community and its practices are movable boundaries, and they do move over time even if only imperceptibly. In some cases the normative configuration of the community and its boundaries may only change as a result of a long series of small cumulative changes that span generations and take centuries or even millennia before resulting in noticeable transformations. Here we would have to look practice by practice to examine these possible gradual transformations, which presumably would be quite different in different areas and aspects of human life: we would have to consider and compare, e.g., the history of mathematics, the history of philosophy, the history of our political institutions, the history of our discursive practices for colour discriminations, etc.

The lesson to be learned from Wittgenstein’s discussions is that we should reject any appeal to a final and homogeneous consensus that fixes the normativity of our practices. The consensus of action and agreements in forms of life that support our practices are neither final nor homogeneous. They contain inner diversity and they are open to revision. This Wittgensteinian view has interesting political implications that have been recently explored by Mouffe (2000) in her defence of radical pluralism in democratic theory. She has argued that instead of eliminating differences and disagreements, the democratic ethos requires that we leave ‘the conversation on justice for ever open’, which inaugurates the project of ‘radical and plural democracy’. As she puts it:

A democratic thinking that incorporates [Wittgenstein’s] insights can be more receptive to the multiplicity of voices that a pluralist society
encompasses and to the need to allow them forms of expression instead of striving towards harmony and consensus [...] in order to impede the closure of the democratic space, it is necessary to abandon any reference to the idea of a consensus that [...] could not be destabilized. The main obstacle to such a ‘radical-pluralistic-democratic’ vision is constituted by the misguided quest for consensus and reconciliation, and this is something that Wittgenstein, with his insistence on the need to respect differences, brings to the fore in a very powerful way.

(2000: p. 77)

4 Conclusion: Dissidence and the Burden of Eccentricity

I want to conclude by talking about the hard work of normative departures and dissenting voices within our normative activities. I have emphasized the crucial normative role that dissidence plays in our practices, but I also want to underscore how difficult it is for dissidence to be properly recognized and to be effective, that is, to lead to the critical examination and perhaps even to the eventual transformation of the normative structure of our practices. The central obstacle for the critical role of normative dissidence emerges from the fact that the tacit agreements of our practices establish a normal way of proceeding, a normal way of using words and responding to them, deeming all other possibilities abnormal. Particular ways of speaking and acting fit the consensus of action underlying a practice; others do not. As participants in a consensus of action, we share normative expectations about what counts as normal; and it is only when these normative expectations about normalcy are in place and left unquestioned that the distinction between correct and incorrect uses of language appears to be clear and unproblematic: ‘It is only in normal cases that the use of a word is clearly prescribed. [...] The more abnormal the case, the more doubtful it becomes what we are to say’ (PI §142).

The assumed normalcy of certain uses of words and courses of action and the assumed abnormality of others constitute the normative background against which we negotiate our judgments and assessments. As Wittgenstein emphasizes, a sense of normalcy is a crucial component of linguistic competence. Our competence in a language-game requires that we develop a sense of how to continue the practice, that we be able to preserve its background consensus of action. Our normative expectations about normalcy structure our interactions in the language-game. These expectations constitute a kind of trust or mutual reliance that makes the continual coordination of action possible. These shared normative expectations amount to the presumption that people will speak and act in accordance with the norms of the practice, that is, in ways that conform with the established consensus of action. We often assume that the future actions and utterances of fellow speakers will
proceed as before, that is, that they will be *normal* and will continue the consensus of the practice as expected. But this *presumption of normalcy* in favour of the established consensus of action is defeasible, and the consensus can – at least in principle – be revisited, called into question, and revised. Our normative expectations about what is normal are sometimes violated even by the most normal subjects. The violation of these expectations does not automatically disqualify a speaker as incompetent and render her speech acts unintelligible. What a violation of expected normalcy does is to *shift the burden* onto the shoulders of the eccentric agent, who must now make a case for the acceptance of her actions in the practice. This is what I call the *burden of eccentricity*. This burden involves a twofold task: showing that there is a connection between the novel course of action and the prior standard behaviour deemed normal; and also showing that this connection is fruitful and promising. A departure from a well-entrenched normative expectation is redeemed by demonstrating how the new use or behaviour can be a legitimate extension, revision, or transformation of the prior consensus of action, and a continuation of the practice that is worth pursuing. The more entrenched the normative expectation violated is, the more difficult this task becomes.

It is important to note that this view does not suggest that the normative expectations speakers share, or the violations they incur and the burdens they take up, are conscious moves in our language-games that require the explicit recognition of speakers. (This would be a form of intellectualism that dispenses with the Wittgensteinian idea of the primacy of action.) On the contrary. This analysis tries to make explicit the tacit normative attitudes exhibited in speakers’ actions and reactions. Often unknowingly, agents frequently take up the burden of eccentricity. Whether they know it or not, they act in ways that depart, to a lesser or greater extent, from standard behaviour. For example, in linguistic behaviour, eccentric speakers may use language with the intent of conforming to accepted uses; they may even be convinced that they in fact do so. But if their speech acts expand the repertoire of available uses of a term and establish new semantic connections, they qualify as eccentric and transformative. Even the linguistic community as a whole may proceed unaware of the eccentric character of new uses and the semantic transformations they produce. If the eccentricity is quickly covered up with enough clear connections with prior uses, it may not even be noticed (i.e. recognized as an eccentricity) and it may be quickly integrated as part of standard usage.

The opportunity for eccentricity is everywhere. But productive eccentricities – those that result in the extension or transformation of our practices – require more than an opportunity to depart from previous uses. In Wittgenstein’s discussions of language-use, every time he considers something that is supposed to dictate the use of a term (such as an intuition), he objects: ‘but it was possible for me to use it differently’ (*PI* §139). We can
also say this when we consider the use of a term in relation to the established agreement of its users (no matter how rigid this agreement may appear). For indeed, as I have argued, agreement does not fix and univocally determine meaning and normativity. But we need more than a mere possibility in order to have an eccentric use that can be considered a candidate for semantic innovation and normative transformation. Outside particular contexts and histories of use, all possibilities have equal value; and as long as we remain in that detached and acontextual perspective, everything is radically indeterminate. Only when our language-games are contextualized can we distinguish between normal and eccentric uses, and can we then subject the latter to normative assessments leading to their rejection or integration in our practices. The eccentricity of novel uses may range from minimal deviation to a radical departure that may look, on the face of it at least, like pure nonsense and madness, mere noise articulated by the babbling mouths of those who otherwise appear to be normal speakers. Eccentric uses must advance from mere possibilities to contextualized opportunities to enrich our practices. Whether the burden of eccentricity is met successfully ultimately depends on the response of the community. In this sense, productive and effective disagreements fuel future agreements, which in turn will be the material of future contestations and normative negotiations. Hence the importance of keeping our practices open and of critically revisiting the tacit agreements on which they rest, trying to recognize differences and giving an opportunity to dissenting voices for raising critical challenges that can enrich the process of normative negotiations within our practices. This is what my argument in this paper has tried to show by emphasizing the crucial normative significance that disagreement, dissidence, and contestation have in our practices.

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Notes

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2 For analyses and discussions of the differences between privacy and individuality and, correspondingly, between publicity and sociality, see Fennell, 2000 and Williams, 2000. Both Fennell and Williams elucidate the normative significance of these different notions, comparing and contrasting public and social accounts of the normativity of meaning.

3 See esp. Scheman and O’Connor, 2002, Heyes, 2003, and my 2004 and 2006. But it is worth noting that the political readings of Wittgenstein can be traced
back to Pitkin, 1973. It is also worth noting those interpretations that connect Wittgenstein to Marxist philosophy (see Kitching, 2002).

My argument will respect the so-called thesis of the *primacy of action* that is often attributed to Wittgenstein. See Williams, 1999: pp. 183–7.

For an analysis of the Wittgensteinian notion of ‘alternative-blindness’, see Williams, 1999: Ch. 6, pp. 157–87

It is not surprising that Brandom has used Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations against both regulism and regularism. See Brandom, 1994: pp. 18–30.

Wittgenstein writes in §311: ‘for the private definition you don’t have to give yourself actual pain; it is enough to imagine it [...] And do you know that what you are giving yourself this exhibition of is pain [...]? And how do you know what you are to give yourself an exhibition of before you do it? This private exhibition is an illusion.’

For a performative account of the crucial significance that *style* can have and how *stylistic differences* can be the site of oppression as well as the site of disruption, see Bourdieu, 1984 and 1991.

See, for example, Ayer, 1954 for a classical formulation of this reading.


Pyrrhonian readings of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy have been articulated and discussed by Fogelin (1994), Sluga (2004), and Stern (2004, 2007).


For a philosophical discussion of this disorder and its history, see Hacking, 1995.

Kripke’s (1982) community view of meaning and rule-following seems to come close to this semantic view; and it has been read in this way by many. For instance, in his critique of Kripke, Blackburn (1984) attributes this kind of social conventionalism to him.

For a full discussion of this point, see Medina, 2002: pp. 185–94.

In stressing that human activities are constrained – though not determined – by their past, Wittgenstein also emphasizes their variability and fluctuation. Thus, for example, he contends that an elucidation of ‘measuring’ as part of ‘human natural history’ can ‘make the concepts of measuring, of exactness, etc., intelligible to us in their variations’ (*RPP* I §1109).

A lesson to learn from the Wittgensteinian notion of ‘family resemblance’ is that similarities and differences are not mutually exclusive. For a discussion of this point, see Medina, 2003.

Take, for example, Wittgenstein’s remarks on the agreement underlying our measuring practices: ‘what we call “measuring” is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement’ (*PI* §242; my italics). The qualification here makes it clear that the required agreement does not exhibit complete uniformity and homogeneity and leaves room for (at least some) disagreements and deviations.

Against the background of the agreement of those who have been acculturated in a language-game, Wittgenstein says, we can say ‘we have here a normal case, and abnormal cases’ (*PI* §141).

This reciprocal reliance and presumption of normalcy facilitate the regulation of our communicative interactions according to shared norms. Our communicative exchanges require *mutual trust*; there is no genuine sharing of perspectives, no genuine intersubjectivity, and no meaningful conflict, disagreement, or debate, without this trust.
23 But in a particular communicative context and against the background of a history of use, the possible uses of a term are heavily constrained – though not determined – by the normative expectations of normalcy shared by language-users.

24 Whether unconventional novel uses amount to new semantic ingredients for the meaning of terms depends on whether these uses are accepted and repeated in future utterances by other speakers. This is what I have termed the semiotic phenomenon of *echoing* (see my 2006: pp. 44 and 136–8). How much echoing a novel use produces is a good measure for how well the burden of eccentricity has been met. Echoing thus functions as a mechanism of normalization: the more a use is echoed, the better accepted it becomes. By being echoed the new use affects the performative chains of repetitions in which word meanings are gestated. Besides echoing, there is another measure of the long-lasting effects of an eccentric new use, and that is whether or not it has an impact on how the use of the term is taught subsequently. As suggested by Wittgenstein’s discussions, the deepest, most extended and most durable semantic transformations are those that are integrated in learning processes and are thus transmitted from generation to generation. Through learning processes what may originally appear to be eccentricities can become institutionalized as part of the normal use and the standard meaning of the term.

References


WITTGENSTEIN AS A REBEL