

The book originates from within a well-established philosophical tradition that considers human beings to be rule-following creatures (the classic German philosophy of Kant or Hegel, then the later Wittgenstein, Sellars, or – at present – Brandom and other inferentialists). It suggests and discusses the idea that rules followed by people provide a tool for understanding them. Unlike Brandomian inferentialism – which provides a part of the background to the book –, I don't focus on the rational structure of rules, their following and their backing mechanisms (sanctions). Instead, I discuss rule-following (or coping with rules) as a complicated and heterogeneous lived practice. Typical examples such as the following play a role here: particularised rules holding in relation to a context or to individual people, the variety of our responses to rules we are subject to, or our failures in the very characteristics of being rule-following creatures (i.e. in cases like addiction that are discussed in chapter 5). The book proposes to characterise the (non-philosophical) talk about “rules-governed practices” as, primarily, a way of giving an account of particular people's characters and their lives and events in them. This focus on understanding others as following particular rules and variously coping with their claims attempts to specify the variety of “attitudes towards a soul” as discussed in the Wittgensteinian tradition. The book attempts to argue a threefold point: 1) Instead of providing a general account of rule following as a uniquely human kind of agency, the perspective is on “rule following” as a significant part of our conceptual equipment informing the way we understand others (and, in particular, appreciate the complications of their lives) as well as themselves. 2) Being, as we are, contingently “thrown” or growing, as individuals, into particular rules acting upon our lives makes it possible to appreciate the importance of the variety of our responses to rules apart from the “mere” acting in accord with them. Such as: living under the burden of rules that we don't like or approve of; violating and bypassing them intentionally; clinging onto them (if they are followed for the sake of, e.g., a particular important person); or failing the very standard of being a normative creature. 3) The reference to rules can help us characterising a person's life and the things in it that matter importantly to her. Telling another's story through the rules that are playing the various roles in it makes the account of her life intersubjectively accessible (as discussed in chapters 4 and 6), while recognising the involuntary aspects of our normative practice and our imperfections or failures therein is what substantiates our compassionate and non-judgmental attitude towards others. One way of making compassion towards another “soul” easier or more intelligible is to focus on (difficult) rules she acknowledges or is subject to.