

# Normativity, Autonomy and Pluralism. Wittgenstein and the Pragmatic Turn in German Philosophy

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1 Habermas and Apel share with the wittgensteinian linguistic turn the main issue which is at stake in the latter. That is: they rely on the linguistic-pragmatic substitution of the traditional Cartesian (and Kantian) subject of representation, thought as the non-empirical and non-objective pre-condition of the possibility of the objective world, with the function of linguistic and communicative interaction as a means of subjective and intersubjective world-disclosure (H. Sluga 1996; Wittgenstein, Tlp, § 5.54- 5.55). The issue basically concerns the way we think about language as a system and a means of representation. What is here at stake is actually the source of its normativity, and the way in which this normativity can be rationally founded.

For the two German philosophers, the link between linguistic reflection and the question of a normative rational foundation of philosophical research on practical reason, and of practical reason itself, is actually provided by the theoretical tradition they refer to. Especially Habermas has tried to structure his reflections on the later Wittgenstein and on the pragmatization of linguistic turn (mostly by Austin and Searle) as a means to reconstruct the philosophical tradition of Critical Theory. This is the theoretical framework inside which Habermas and Apel attempt a criticism of late wittgensteinian theses. The question of the "authority of language" (Edwards 1990) thus becomes the pragmatic substitute of the question concerning the rational sources of the authority of practical and theoretical reason. Consequently, the question concerning the normative foundation of critical theory concerns the way inter-subjective obligation to such an authority can be thought as a function of the problem of subjective rational autonomy and self-reflexivity. The solution to this problem represents for Habermas and Apel a way of escaping from late Critical theory's contradictions and of thinking of a non-instrumental and nonobjectivating reason.

Inside this framework, the two philosophers' reading of Wittgenstein is shaped by the need of rescuing the consensual feature of the latter quasi-conventionalist approach while escaping from what they think of as a form of anti-normative relativism and contextualism. Their criticism of the *Philosophical investigations'* theses is based on two main points. The first concerns the question of incommunicability between linguistic games, and the real meaning of Wittgenstein's "pluralism" (Apel 1972). The second, strictly related, concerns the foundation question, that is: the question of the representability of the source of normative representation.

Both Habermas and Apel take the latter issue as fundamental for the needs of a critical social theory. They see in the later Wittgenstein a radically anti-normative approach to the question of the self-reflexivity of inter-subjective obligation to linguistic and pragmatic rules. Their criticism of this point rests on a conception of rational practical autonomy as based on the capacity and possibility to transcend every factual - empirical obligation to authority by appeal to a higher ideal authority (i.e. Habermas 1967, pp. 90 ff.; 1971 pp. 67 ff.; 1981, pp. 412 ff). What is here important is in fact how this transcending is thought, and the kind of philosophical justification the

higher authority can claim to rest on. Such a justification is identified, both by Habermas and Apel, with the idealist feature of linguistic world-disclosure. The idealism here concerns the interpretation and criticism of the late wittgensteinian notion of an intersubjective consensus as central to the determination of meaning inside the systematical framework of language as a social praxis (Habermas 1982; Apel 1972). We shall start our analysis from this second point.

What is here at stake is the pragmatic meaning of this consensus, that is: the pragmatic level of judgments and justifications rather than the semantic question of meaning. The link between the two is obviously given by the identification of language with a social praxis (PU, § 51, 202, 560; BIB, pp. 5, 61; BF, III 317), and the definition of linguistic rules as constitutive of this praxis. Habermas and Apel assume this link to be constitutive of the normativity of language in a way antithetical to Wittgenstein's.

The latter's notion of "linguistic game" highlights, against the main assumptions of the *Tractatus*, the contingency and the conventional character of the normative rule system by which the meaning depends. As it is well known, Wittgenstein now gives up the idea of a system of possible meanings as a closed and definitively fixed horizon, and the attribution of the normative feature of language to the fact of mirroring empirical reality. The central notions of rule following and rule-sharing are in turn based on the conventional and arbitrary character of the inter-subjective consensus on which they rely (PG, § 133; WWK, p. 93; Z, § 357). The social consensus sustaining the systematic character of language (that is: language as a system of rules by which in turn significant differences can be defined), is therefore the source of a factual normativity that seems not to be able to transcend itself (Kripke 1982, pp. 15 ff. and 27-49). The later Wittgenstein's "full blooded conventionalism" (Dummett 1978) confers a purely empirical value to the linguistic role, played by its consensual structure, of world-disclosure. This means that the pre-empirical, and quasi-transcendental, condition of experience of empirical world is in fact factual and practical, though not representable but only shown by the practice of speaking and understanding. Wittgenstein argues here against any kind of foundationalism.

This in turn explains the notion of pluralism, which especially attains to the source of normativity. There is no "source", or "essence" of language, but a plurality of levels of linguistic organization of reality; there is no meta-language thinkable as a way of selfthematization of its normative structure (i.e. PU § 108). The whole structure of philosophical representation is in fact revisited: the normativity of statements, practical and theoretical, is a function of a pre-determining factual condition of factuality. This is what Habermas calls a social reflexivity of language, which is in no way a social self-reflexivity of the inter-subjective obligation to rules.

Habermas and Apel argue against Wittgenstein's conventionalism and its consequent contextualist development, for which no communication between

different linguistic games seems to be possible, by a two-step move. Against the conventionalist and purely factual character of social consensus they argue for a normative foundation showing a necessary character. The status of this necessity is in fact, as we shall see, controversial, for Habermas and Apel seem to appeal both to a logical necessity and to an artificial moral necessity (identified with the "emancipating character of modern reason") (Apel 1972, pp. 203 ff.; Habermas 1985). In any case, both refer to the notion of a performative contradiction in order to define the necessity of thinking of the inter-subjective consensus framing the social praxis of speaking and understanding as an idealist world disclosure in which and through which the function of world-disclosure can be defined as the locus of autonomy and equality of speaking-subjects. They both think to the communicative function of language as prominent, and attribute to an ideal communicative situation the role that Wittgenstein attributed to social consensus, with a surplus of (ethical, neither logical nor empirical) normativity given by the inescapable character of its emancipating features. Emancipation is here identified with the form of context-transcendence made possible by the meta-language of equal and free inter-subjectivity. In this framework, autonomy is precisely freedom from established conventions, and the way in which this freedom actually becomes operative is the structuring of communication as argumentation. Against Wittgenstein's idea that the limit of reasons is given by the boundaries of my linguistic game, they postulate the necessity of a universal, normative "game of games" through which an idealist version of linguistic interaction is rescued. They take his meta-game to be the practice of discussion in ideal factual conditions, and think of it as playing a rule of self-justification (thus, of justification of the very criteria of justification). Consensus resulting from the practice of arguing and justifying in ideal conditions is then identified with the normative structure of communicative world disclosure. This normative structure is said to be necessary in virtue of the fact that any attempt to enter the communicative-argumentative game cannot bypass the rules of equality, freedom and inclusion recognized for every member of the communication community. Wittgenstein's attempt to reduce the *Sollen* to a *Sein* is here rehearsed.

The second step is given by the statement of the universal character of such a game of games. From this viewpoint, the necessity of postulating a game of games (which Apel identifies with the linguistic game of philosophical argumentation; Apel 1976, 1997.) is stated as a function of the factual possibility of universal, (non-contextual) criticism. The link between the pragmatic and the semantic dimension is here fully explicit: Habermas and Apel argue for the existence of a point of view, at once internal and external to every linguistic game, by which translation and argumentation is in any case possible. This is in fact the very possibility of thinking of the dialectics between performativity and objectivity as structuring the practice of communication. Wittgenstein's pluralism of language-games, thus the recognition of a plurality of *levels of representation*, is indirectly denied. The denial is actually a result of postulating the pre-determination of linguistic-communicative practices by a normative quasi-transcendental framework which structures the interactive praxis without being structured by it.

2 What is here carried out is a deep revision of Wittgenstein's conception of language and language *use* as conventionally determining the level of linguistic-rational representation. That is: the whole idea of the dependence of the normative structure from interactive practices which

do exhaust themselves in the normative framework of their communicative recognition. I think that this revision can be defined in terms of an attempt to install a Kantian notion of rationality and autonomy inside the framework of the linguistic turn. Both Habermas and Apel recognize this; Apel explicitly speaks of a "semiotization of Kantianism". The idealist turn through which Wittgenstein is interpreted directly refers to a process of linguistic-pragmatic reading of the classical continental conception of representation. The aporias and misunderstandings of this reading seem to depend on such an operation.

Habermas and Apel inherit from the Kantian notion of practical autonomy a fundamental feature. That is: practical individual autonomy comes to be identified with the capacity of transcending the context by appealing to a normative universal rational form. This is basically an appeal to a universal thought as normative and necessary in virtue of its being at once the *prius* and the *posterius* of rational representation. The Kantian conception of practical reason, especially as it is exposed in the *Foundation of the metaphysics of customs*, relies on the teleological and tautological function of the notion of "universality" of reason. The abstraction from contextual ends and means is the necessary precondition of practical autonomy, as it is clear from the very concept of "practical (good) will". This abstraction is in turn the result of a formalistic and teleological conception of practical reason. Thus the very structure of obligation to practical norms (and especially of obligation to the categorical imperative) depends on the universality of the form as at once means and end of context-transcending (FMS, § 398, 421, 429, 444, etc.).

The idealist framework of Habermas' and Apel's conception of communicative autonomy actually replies the Kantian assumption that central for the individual being autonomous and self-reflexive is its capacity to assume the transcendental point of view of rational universality as the form and content of his will. The idealistic pre-determination is thus made possible by the objective subsistence of a quasi-metaphysical framework which in turn is *neutral* to every empirical determination of the will. Its neutrality, which Habermas assumes as the main feature of the communicative-universal point of view, thus of the game of games represented by the ideal speech situation, is in fact ethically shaped. Apel takes this ethical direction to be that of a "universal history" of communication and translation.

The Kantian conception of transcendental and formalistic normativity of practical reason is clearly not compatible with the wittgensteinian refusal of any a-priori determination of the structure-essence of (linguistic) representation. The "final" point of view of justification, given in Kantian metaphysics by the "kingdom of ends" as the possibility condition of autonomy, is actually antithetical to the main assumptions of the *Philosophical investigations*. The illusion of an a-priori universal and normative point of view must here clearly be denied. Does this mean that one has deny any possibility of a non-relativistic reading and development of late wittgensteinian ideas?

3 We must here come back for a moment to Wittgenstein's notion of incommunicability (incommensurability) between linguistic games, which is directly related to the question of autonomy as a capacity to transcend the given conventional context. The notion is interpreted by Habermas and Apel in terms of a profession of full-blooded relativism, and said to be meaningless in virtue of the factual operativity of translation.

In fact, what Wittgenstein is here saying concerns another level, at which this criticism seems not to be reasonable. It concerns precisely the level of normative judgment, at which no neutral point of view is possible. The point of view (that is to say: the criteria of judgment), is thought of as necessarily internal to a linguistic game. The plurality of linguistic games being the plurality of levels of representation, thus of organization of reality, the issue is here given by the incommensurability of paradigmatic pre-conceptions of reality and of the same inter-subjective reading of it. This does not mean that a judgment is not possible; it only means that a neutral, super-partes position is an illusion. However, in the PU, we are faced with the game of imagining linguistic games different from ours (PU, § 299; see also Z, § 350). I think that what actually makes this imagination game possible is precisely the consciousness that the criteria of the game are in some way "biased". Wittgenstein is certainly *not* interested in transforming the practice of linguistic criticism into an emancipating practice. However, he speaks about the "imagination game" as a way of acquiring consciousness and a better degree of understanding of our concepts and paradigmatic assumptions ( VB, p.141).

This acquisition of consciousness seems to highlight the basis of a possible redefinition of the classical concept of autonomy, in terms of a capacity of understanding the *genealogy* of our paradigmatical framework of reference's features. Starting from the participative character of such an understanding, and from the assumption that the very recognition of family resemblances between linguistic games is in turn based on what "all men have in common", that is: on features and criteria recognizable from a point of view much "lower" than that postulated by Habermas and Apel, that the notion of autonomy can be thought as deeply linked with that of pluralism.

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