

On Wittgenstein on Certainty

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1. In the preface to *On Certainty* Anscombe and von Wright say that in 1949 Malcolm suggested to Wittgenstein to think again about Moore's "Defense of Common Sense" (1925) and "Proof of an External World" (1939). Malcolm himself had written on the issue in "Defending Common Sense" (1949). In the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein quotes Nestroy saying that there is usually very little progress in philosophy. But I think some progress has been made from Moore and Malcolm to Wittgenstein regarding skepticism. There is more awareness of practice and perspective and this opens the discussion in novel ways. But it also gives rise to new problems, in particular regarding morality and cultural relativity. I will introduce conceptions of inner and outer relativity and of relative and hierarchical systematicity, and this will lead me to criticize one-sided therapy readings. Rule following should not be too blind.

2. The progress I see consists in a certain opening-up of horizon and discussion and is the result of the introduction of language games and basic practices. Languages and practices change over time and there is more than one of them. Such plurality also fits our time. We now do not only have Descartes' dream scenario or the much earlier butterfly dream of Zhuangzi, but we also have experiments with rubber-hands and ideas about brains in vats and whole visions about a Matrix. Things can be imagined to change gradually. You could be placed into a vat tomorrow, so that your memories would still be true and only new impressions wrong. Maybe this happened to you already yesterday, last week, or ten years ago. Thus gradual change can be imagined and it is not an all-or-nothing game any more.

3. The new picture Wittgenstein offers gives up ideas of strict hierarchy (H) and clear precision of rules and application. It gives up what I call "H-systematicity". In its place it emphasizes mutual dependency between rules and application, leading to what I call "inner relativity" and "R-systematicity". Thus Wittgenstein talks of houses carrying their foundations (*On Certainty* 248). Everything depends on everything else within the system. "What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it." *Was feststeht, tut dies nicht, weil es an sich offenbar oder einleuchtend ist, sondern es wird von dem, was darum herum liegt, festgehalten* (OC 144). "I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house." *Ich bin auf dem Boden meiner Überzeugungen angelangt. Und von dieser Grundmauer könnte man beinahe sagen, sie werde vom ganzen Haus getragen* (OC 248). There is an inner relativity resulting from mutual dependency between everything and everything else within the system. Similarly Quine uses the metaphor of a Roman arch in which the stones support each other, and he argues that statements and beliefs are merely more or less central or peripheral. Wittgenstein talks of rivers, sandbanks, and riverbeds, all of which change gradually, such that, although there are still distinctions in terms of stability, these distinctions are only a matter of degree. There can be asymmetry, but there is no strict hierarchy. Within a system of beliefs and practices there is mutual dependency. The foundations (*Grundmauer*) carry the house, and the house (*das ganze Haus*) "carries" the

foundations by keeping them in place through its mere weight. All parts support and depend on each other. A river carries water and the water brings sand and shapes the river (OC 96-9). This leads to "inner relativity".

According to Wittgenstein, to know our ways within a system and to participate in its practices we rely on our basic animal instincts and our sensitivities. (About the latter, see Alice Cray 2007.) Due to the relevance of such sensitivity also aesthetic aspects play a role here. (For a discussion of aesthetic aspects regarding meaning, see Wenzel 2010.) All this leads to what I think of as "openness". Instead of strict hierarchies based on axioms and derived propositions, or rules and meta-rules, we have to accept the fact that we live with such inner relativities and mutual dependencies within our system. (For a defense of the idea of indeterminacy as constitutive of our psychological lives, see ter Hark 2004.)

Wittgenstein's continued considerations of alternative possibilities and variations of our situation and practice make Moore's approach seem overly narrow and fixed. Thus Rush Rhees observes that "the notion of a language game is not closed" (Rhees 9). Indeed, we can observe that there is a time index to language games: "a language game does change with time" *Andererseits ändert sich das Sprachspiel mit der Zeit* (OC 256); and there is also a space index: "I am in England. – Everything around me tells me so" *Ich bin in England. – Alles um mich herum sagt es mir* (OC 421). Thus indices introduce limitations, because "everything around me" is not really everything there is. When Wittgenstein writes: "I have no reason to doubt this. 'Everything speaks in its favor and nothing against it'" *Zum Zweifeln fehlen mir die Gründe! 'Es spricht alles dafür, und nichts dagegen'* (OC 4, my translation), then he (intentionally) leaves room for doubt, because, again, "everything" in this context is not really everything there is. It is only everything we have encountered so far.

4. In his 1925 paper, Moore gave a list of basic statements that he thought we all "know, with certainty, to be true" (106). These are statements about our own body, things around us, other bodies, the earth, our perceptions, expectations, beliefs, and such. Although nobody knows their exact analyses, they are "unambiguous" and we all understand their meanings (111). Doubting them, he argued, would introduce ambiguity and self-contradiction. But Moore got involved in sense-data analysis (128-132) and he thought, differently from Russell, it seems to me, that the existence of the external world is not just our best hypothesis. He wanted more, and certainly he did not like ambiguity. In his 1939 paper he analyzed the Kantian expressions "the existence of things outside of us" (147) and "things external to our minds" (149); and he did not find them very clear and offered his own famous proof of the existence of the external world by holding up his hands and saying: "Here is one hand ... and here is another" (166). *This* he thought he knows for sure, even though he admitted that he cannot give a proof. (Kant actually had thought to have given a proof in his Refutation of Idealism, in terms of self-consciousness, time and space, the categories, and apperception. But Moore, unfortunately, did not say anything about this.)

How does Wittgenstein compare with this? I think he was impressed by Moore's honesty and sincerity but not

by his conception of statements and ambiguity. For Wittgenstein statements have meaning only in contexts, and these are more varied and indeterminate in his view than in Moore's. Contextual "inner relativity" and openness surface more in Wittgenstein, and he has less trust in abstract argument and deduction. When you carry, so to speak, a word, or statement, from one context to another, it will change its face and assume a slightly different meaning. Hence abstract argument and deduction easily go wrong.

5. But such inner relativity leads to problems of what I want to call "outer relativity". Outer relativity arises when different systems with their language games and practices meet. Whereas inner relativity is based on mutual *dependency within a single* system, outer relativity is marked by mutual *independence between different* systems. You do it your way, I do it my way (or we do it our way). You have your language game and your practice, I have mine (or we have ours). Unfortunately, this easily gives rise to conflict, and it seems to me Wittgenstein does not much address this problem.

The question I want to pose therefore is this: Which system would fare better and be more suitable (or maybe even be morally better) when different cultures and world views come into contact with each other, one that is based more on inner relativity (R) or one that is based more on hierarchy and ideas of precision and completeness (H)? Thus we have turned Wittgenstein's descriptive picture into a question about normativity. We ask whether it is enough to point to our basic practices when asked for justification. Can we just say that this is simply what we do? What I mean by "normativity" here is not only the nature of norms as taught by others, how to count or how to use certain words. About that Wittgenstein had already written with respect to rule-following. The normativity I have in mind here is moral normativity, the question of what we should do when meeting another person with a background unknown to us and when moral conflict arises. How should we behave in such a situation? Here the norms are not readily available.

Medina 2004 has argued that Wittgenstein's reflections about enculturation and internalization of norms go beyond Quine's naturalism. They allow us to see for instance how chimpanzees can be said to learn how to follow rules (86). Ter Hark 2004 has even suggested specific traces from Darwin's *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* in Wittgenstein's reflections about facial expressions. All this is helpful, but I think it is too much limited to behavioristic and descriptive aspects. What is missing is the moral aspect. There are situations when we reflect about what to do regarding other people, and in such situations we take ourselves to be responsible for what we do. This act of taking responsibility involves considerations of autonomy. It requires abstraction, idealization, and reflexive awareness of rules. It requires visions of ideal situations. This, I think, goes beyond R-systematicity and cannot fully be grasped by mere description and behaviorism. It is in this context that H-systematicity matters, at least tentatively, reflectively, and in regulative ways, and this, it seems to me, is missing in Wittgenstein and his emphasis on what I have called R-systematicity. Situations of moral conflict are often new and unfamiliar to us, and when finding ourselves in such situations we cannot simply rely on our habits and familiar practices. This would not solve intercultural or inter-religious conflicts. To the contrary, it would make them worse.

6. One can find in Wittgenstein certain aesthetic and ethical elements. There is sensitivity for the particular situation and hesitancy in passing judgment. This can be good and commendable, especially when meeting other cultures, or an individual that comes from a social background unfamiliar to us. But two problems arise. First, the demand on sensitivity can be too high. Second, it is questionable whether such sensitivity and awareness of language games and practices would be enough, and whether old ideas of hierarchy and precision can be given up. I doubt this. I think we always need ideas of exactness, rules, and hierarchy, especially when meeting people from unfamiliar cultures. After all, we cannot learn all the practices and languages of different cultures. We cannot live in Kirchberg am Wechsel, Paris, and Taipei, or in New York City, Mahabalipuram, and the Amazon rainforest at the same time. This is simply impossible. We cannot be habituated and sensitive to all these cultures and forms of life. We cannot all learn Chinese, French, and Tamil, and be sensitive to all the nuances of using words and of reading facial expressions. But sometimes we do meet people from such places and have to interact with them. Thus relying on practice is not enough. Germans living in Japan will easily find that many things are expected not to be said directly, or even not at all. But Japanese don't see it this way. They easily read between the lines. Besides the problem of understanding, there is also the problem of evaluation. We don't assume that all practices are equally good and commendable. We compare them and for such comparison dialog and criteria are necessary, for which in turn ideas of H-systematicity are needed in various reflective and regulative ways. Such ideas can be useful to avoid conflict, to avoid blind reliance on one's own practice (R) as well as blind attempts to turn the other, unfamiliar system (be it R or H) upside down, by force, or war. Rule-following should not be that blind. Instead, hypothetical and reflective thinking and argumentation are necessary, and drill (*Abrichtung*, as Wittgenstein often saw teaching) is not enough.

7. These considerations cast a new light on recent therapy readings. Mere therapy, the view that our metaphysical ideas about hierarchy, essence, and precision are misguided and that we should be cured of them, might turn out to be one-sided, if not false, no matter whether Wittgenstein meant his considerations this way or not. Thus I think the therapy reading should not be overdone. And what metaphysics is meant here? Kantian categories for instance are not as fixed and determinate as one might think. They are vague and in need of application (schematization). So are Kantian concepts of time and space, original synthetic apperception, sensibility and understanding. Kant already was aware of the infinite regress problem in rule applications and he spoke of *Mutterwitz* (mother wit) and *Abrichtung* (drill) in this context (A 133-4). But this did not stop him from undertaking the project of transcendental philosophy. His theory of judgments of taste is even more open in many ways, despite its systematic character. Thus I think there is no need for therapy here. Maybe we instead need a counter therapy for such fashionable therapy-readings. Also the idea of wider concepts of rationality that encompasses sensitivity and emotions, although it has much to recommend itself, should not be carried too far.

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