IMAGINARY ANTHROPOLOGIES
ON WITTGENSTEIN'S LAST WRITINGS AND EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM

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Abstract

To Wittgenstein's late thought is often attributed a form of cultural or epistemic relativism, according to which truths are relative to the criteria of justification valid within a linguistic community. This paper aims to show that this attribution lies largely on a misinterpretation of Wittgenstein's ideas on the relation between language-games and forms of life. In the first section are presented the grounds for some relativist readings of Wittgenstein's thought. In the second section, through the analysis of some passages of the *Tractatus* and *On Certainty*, it is argued that, although Wittgenstein insisted on the "ungroundedness" of our language-games, he did not mean that *any* epistemic attitude, as long as it is endorsed by a community, is as valid as any other one. Rather, it is possible to show that some games better apply to our world and appear thus as more objective, so that there can be a difference in the validity of world-picures, contrary to what the epistemic relativist holds. In the third and final section, it is claimed that the different communities that appear in Wittgenstein's examples are not actual or existing alternative possibilities, but an imaginary anthropology that Wittgenstein uses to enlighten how *we*, humans, work with *our* language-games. So, it is not possible to attribute him the idea that different games underly different forms of life, as some relativist authors do. It is concluded that Wittgenstein was not likely to be a cultural relativist.

1. Wittgenstein and relativism

The claim that the "second" Wittgenstein is one of the contemporary fathers of relativism is widely accepted, both by relativist and anti-relativist commentators (e.g. Phillips 1977, Rorty 1979, Arrington 1989, Glock 1996, Baghramian 2004, Boghossian 2006, O'Grady 2015). To him is often attributed a form of *epistemic* or *cultural* relativism, namely the position according to which, since any experienceable aspect of the world is always

mediated by enculturation, and thus by the conventions of a given group (Herskovits 1960: 61), there might exist a multiplicity of incompatible and irreconcilable epistemic systems and no single final criterion for adjudicating between them (Baghramian 2004: 67). Hence, knowledge would always be *situated*: it would depend on the culture of reference.

It is not difficult to see why Wittgenstein's late thought could be *prima facie* read accordingly. Indeed, in *On Certainty*, he claims that the foundations of any language-game are certainties, epistemic "hinges" around which the game revolves because if they were removed we would "knock from under [our] feet the ground" (OC: §492) on which we base *all* our judgments, thus breaking sensible communication (Perissinotto 1991, Moyal-Sharrock 2004, Coliva 2010a, Fabbroni 2023). According to Wittgenstein, some beliefs are "the foundation of operating with thoughts (with language)" (OC: §401), and cannot be themselves proven true nor false, rational nor irrational, justified nor unjustified (OC: §§93–99, 110, 130, 196–206, 222, 307, 499, 559). Certainties are not subject to epistemological investigation, but are "part of our *method* of doubt and enquiry" (OC: §151). That is to say, they provide the grounds on which knowledge can be claimed (OC: §§18, 243). But, indeed, "if the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false" (OC: §205).

Moreover, we do not hold just *some* certainties: language-games are built on a *net* of beliefs, which form "a system, a structure" (OC: §102) that undergoes all our assertions (OC: §162). Indeed, when we learn to play the game "a *totality* of judgments is made plausible to us" (OC: §140); such totality constitutes our world-picture, the scaffolding that "gives our way of looking at things, and our researches, their form" (OC: §211). The world-picture has no verofunctionality as well (OC: §§95, 142, 144): at the bottom of it lies no intellectualization, but "the ungrounded way of acting" (OC: §§105, 110) of the form of life that is playing the game. Now, given that "whether I *know* something depends on whether the evidence backs me up or contradicts me" (OC: §504), and that the criteria of validation for the grounds offered are directly rooted in our world-picture, the fact that a proposition *p*

is regarded as true "belongs […] to the description of the language-game" (OC: §82), because "the *truth* of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference" (OC: §83).

Wittgenstein's description of the communal and shared base of the language-games seems very in line with the assumptions of cultural relativism (Glock 1996: 22, 32, 48-50, 110). Underlining the *praxeological*, *social* character of playing a language-game (Voltolini 1997: 40) supports the idea that truth is relative to some *choice* of criteria of justification. More specifically, it seems to support the claim that the truth of *p* just implies the adherence of *p* to the criteria of truth in a specific system, depending on the world-picture of reference (Marconi 1987: 121-122). Moreover, given that no worldview is in itself justified or unjustified, there could be — and, according to the cultural relativist, there *are* — different epistemic systems, none of which would be intrinsically correct but each of which could certify as justified (and *true*) different propositions. Indeed, some authors have claimed that Wittgenstein's account might bring to the removal of the possibility of objectivity and knowledge, because "beliefs held within a way of life cannot claim any truth which ought to be accepted by non-participants" (Trigg 1991: 217-218). Similarly, it has been suggested that, given that speaking a language is central to being a form of life (PI §§19, 23, 238, 264), the presence of different games with different underlying world-pictures might imply a difference in *forms of life*. More specifically, "there could be forms of life which use rules of logic and processes of reasoning substantially different from the ones we take for granted" (Baghramian 2004: 76; see also Arrington 1989). This would be reflected in one famous Wittgensteinian example: that of a possible community of people who "sell timber by cubic measure" (RFM: §148). In this case, Wittgenstein wonders,

> how could we show them that […] you don't really buy more wood if you buy a pile covering a bigger area? – I should, for instance, take a pile which was small by their

ideas and, by laying logs around, change it into a 'big' one. This might convince them – but perhaps they would say: 'Yes, now it's a lot of wood and costs more' – and that would be the end of the matter. –We should presumably say in this case: they simply do not mean the same by 'a lot of wood' and 'a little wood' as we do; and they have a quite different system of payment from us (RFM: §150).

What he seems to suggest here is that not only a community with such different methods of measurement is imaginable, but also that we might not convince them that the amount of wood has not changed with a change in disposition, because of their very different epistemic methods and viewpoint on reality. Our systems would be simply incompatible and, given the ungroundedness of different language-games, there would be no principled way to say that their beliefs about what is true are incorrect. Indeed, some authors, like Boghossian (2006: 70-72, 108-109), suggest that Wittgenstein would have been sympathetic to the idea that the "cubic-payment community" has a different epistemology or logic from us.

Thus, the epistemic relativist reading of Wittgenstein holds that his late works give rise to an understanding of language-games which implies the fact that different communities, sometimes intended even as different forms of life, might have incompatible but equally valid ways of intending justifications, truth and even logic. However, the next two sections will argue that this reading lies in a misunderstanding about the ungroundedness of the language-games and the notion of forms of life.

2. Evaluating epistemic systems

Let us return to the claim generally shared by cultural relativists, according to which "where language-games and forms of life as such are concerned no room is left for the notions of truth and falsity" and, therefore, "reason […] cannot be wrenched apart from [language-

games] so as to pass judgment from the standpoint of some contextless and external realm of truth" (Trigg 1991: 215-216). Principally, this argument is not very straightforward: at the very least, it is unclear what a contextless and external realm of truth would be and why would we need it (Vinten 2020: 52-53). Nevertheless, the most interesting point raised by Trigg is the removal of objectivity supposedly made by Wittgenstein that would lead to an infinity of equally but irreconcilable true statements within different games. To give grounds for this claim of *alethic* relativism Trigg quotes a famous passage from the *Investigations*:

> 'So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?' — It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life (PI: §241, italics mine).

Nonetheless, on a more careful reading, Wittgenstein states that what is true or false is *not* decided by human agreement. The agreement is in the language-game used, not in the verofuctionality of some statements. Wittgenstein is not claiming that truth is relative to a game or form of life, but he is making a *grammatical* observation of our *use* of the predicate of truth: we assign truth to a proposition when it adheres to the criteria of a certain game for truth-ascriptions. However, in a community, something can be deemed true without such a thing making the assertion *ipso facto* true. In fact, the principle that criteria of truth and correctness are only relative to a game and cannot be evaluated from outside of it is quite difficult to defend. Firstly, it leads to counterintuitive conclusions: why would the statement "Bloodletting will cure your fever" be true for a Greek doctor of the 1st century B.C. and false, even dangerous, for one of today's EU? But, most importantly, alethic relativism requires ontological relativism, given the need for various, even contrasting and infinite, *true* states of affairs at the same time — a very naïve position never forwarded by Wittgenstein (Vinten 2020: 51-52). Indeed, even if nothing makes a worldview intrinsically

better than another, it does not mean that each one has the *same* validity. This topic is introduced in the *Tractatus*, with regards to the example of the description of some irregular black spots on a white surface, which shows how the choice of a set of theoretical principles *is* arbitrary, but *only to a certain extent*. For this purpose, we could cover the surface with a sufficiently fine square mesh, and thus build a "scientific theory" of which true or false propositions ("square *x* is black", "square *y* is white") determine a form of world-picture (TLP 6.341). Crucially, the mash's form

> is optional, since I could have achieved the same result by using a net with a triangular or hexagonal mesh. Possibly the use of a triangular mesh would have made the description simpler […] we could describe the surface more accurately with a coarse triangular mesh than with a fine square mesh (or conversely), and so on. The different nets correspond to different systems for describing the world (TLP 6.341).

So, there is no a priori reason to choose one sort of description over another. In principle, they are all as justified. However, not all possible descriptions are *equal* in terms of accuracy: whether a mesh's point turns out white or black is not an arbitrary circumstance, because it depends on how the spots are distributed on the surface, not on how the mesh is made. Indeed, certain meshes can produce a more precise description of the spots than others. Similarly, although the way of describing the world is arbitrary, the fact that some descriptions are more accurate than others is not, since this depends on *how the world is made* and *not* on how we see it (Frascolla 2006: 128-130). In fact, "we are […] told something about the world by the fact that it can be described more simply with one system […] than with another" (TLP 6.342).

Interestingly, Wittgenstein does not seem to have changed opinion in *On Certainty*:

'But is there then no objective truth? Isn't it true, or false, that someone has been on the moon?' If we are thinking within our system, then it is certain that no one has ever been on the moon. Not merely is nothing of the sort ever seriously reported to us by reasonable people, but our whole system of physics forbids us to believe it (OC: §108).

We all believe that it isn't possible to get to the moon; but there might be people who believe that that is possible and that it sometimes happens. We say: *these people do not know a lot that we know*. […] *they are wrong and we know it. If we compare our system of knowledge with theirs then theirs is evidently the poorer one by far* (OC: §286, italics mine).

Given the knowledge and the technology of his time, getting to the Moon was deemed impossible, let alone that someone had already done it. Indeed, if someone believed so, they would just be wrong, they would *know less*. Again, some descriptions, though being *as* arbitrary, apply *better* to the world than others, thus being more objective. In these terms, take the case of Kuhn's (1962) scientific paradigm shifts. At a certain point, it appeared just clear that the Copernican system fitted empirical observations better than the Ptolemaic one, and this led to further discoveries. Even if it was possible, with additional complicated epicycles, to fit the Ptolemaic one with the observations, the fact that the Copernican system could more simply and effectively explain and predict *does* tell us something about the world: "one can *draw* inferences from a false proposition" (TLP 4.023). In this sense, a community that, for religious or cultural reasons, would still believe in heliocentrism, would have beliefs that would not match the actual world and would constitute a poorer description of it than the one that considers modern physics.

Then, world-pictures can change to be more objective, adapting to the world. Moreover, some worldviews adapt better than others, meaning that even if in principle all world-descriptions are justified, not *all* games have the *same* validity. Thus, Wittgenstein

just argues about the *ungroundedness* of our language-games, but not their being equally correct in favour of some epistemic relativism.

3. The human form of life

Two questions remain then outstanding: why arguing about this ungroundedness, if not for relativistic reasons? Relatedly, why does Wittgenstein give multiple examples of different communities playing, apparently, very different games than ours?

It is not to forget what is Wittgenstein's main target in *On Certainty*: scepticism; specifically, that kind of sceptical doubt that is meant to be *radical,* questioning *everything* that can be questioned, until the certainty which removes all doubts is reached. Wittgenstein, arguing against this foundational strategy that he tracks back to Descartes (1637/1998) and is exemplified by Moore's (1959) famous "proof" of an external world, wants to counter on the one hand the sceptical trope of the infinite regress of the demand for reasons and on the other its obverse, namely that if there is no ultimate, foundational and proven reason, we rely on "assumptions [that are] unguaranteed" (RFM VII: 21). The ungroundedness of our language-games points thus to the fact that there are no ultimate answers: at a certain point, *simply*, when reasons and justifications have been exhausted (OC: §192), "I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do'" (PI: §217). And *this bedrock* constitutes the certainties that govern our game, and which cannot be proven. Therefore, the world-picture is tied to a form of life's way of acting not in a relativistic sense, but in disagreement with the foundational strategy.

Regarding the second question, it is worth noticing that when Wittgenstein, in his last writings, talks about "our" games or worldviews, it is quite unlikely, contrary to what relativists hold, to attribute an empirical sense to this first person plural: "us" is not understood as opposed to a "them" — be it us Westerners, us 20th-century men, etc. Indeed,

it is never possible to detect, in the *Investigations* as in *On Certainty,* such a use whereby the plural personal pronoun indicates or refers to a *particular* human group placed in antithesis to another:

> Relativism, then, is not really the issue. While the 'we' of Wittgenstein's remarks often looks like the 'we' of our group as contrasted with other human groups, that is basically misleading (Williams 1974: 92).

Rather, when Wittgenstein uses "we" or "our", he appears to refer to the *human form of life* (Hanfling 2002, Biletzki 2015): there seems to be nothing human that is *so* different that could *radically* diverge from us. At best it would be a problem of interpretation or translation. Still, there is no human community that is so radically far from us that it could be classified as a *different form of life*. Indeed, the examples of very different communities, like the "cubic-payment" one, seem to have a *self-reflective* aim: "The language-games are rather set up as *objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities" (PI: §130). In fact, interacting with that community, we may want to revise our translation or understanding of their "a lot/a little of wood" expressions, "because we can't go against the hinge that one thing — a certain amount of wood — is identical to itself, no matter how we arrange it" (Coliva 2010b: 14). That is, it seems that according to Wittgenstein we should refrain from thinking that they have *radically* different beliefs, because "their knowledge of nature cannot be *fundamentally* different from ours" (RF: 246): the human form of life underlies all possible differences in the games played by different communities, *pace* Baghramian and Boghossian. Coliva (2010b) also underlines this point in analyzing the example of the Azande tribe, which was longly deemed to not perceive logical contradiction (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 23), but *only* due to an error of translation (Bloor 1976/1991: 123-130). Thus, it is precisely because we humans do *not* act in a certain way that Wittgenstein

introduces all his different communities. These appear in Wittgenstein's examples not as actual or existing alternative possibilities, but as an *imaginary anthropology* playing *imaginary games* to cast light on the *actual* games that we play, to bring to light those grammatical structures that define the limits of our world-picture (Andronico 1986: 15).

In conclusion, due to the arguments thus examined, it seems incorrect to attribute epistemic relativism to Wittgenstein: the different communities he portrays are just used to negatively enlighten how *we*, *humans*, work, and the ungroundedness of our language-games does not mean that any epistemic system is as valid as any other. At best, for this last reason, he can be said to endorse that *very* mild form of relativism that is anti-foundationalism, namely the position to which it is nonsensical to demand ultimate justification criteria for a language-game.

Acknowledgments

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