

ANTI-PHILOSOPHY? – WITTGENSTEIN ON RULES, NORMS, AND CONVENTIONS

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It is well-known among scholars that Wittgenstein's philosophy was not meant to explain anything. For that reason its task was restricted, especially after 1931 when he envisaged a new method in philosophy (PO, p. 133; M, pp. 315-317),¹ to description only (PI §§ 109, 124). Imparting new information was definitively not included among the philosophical prerogatives. Even before *Investigations*, already in the *Tractatus*, there is a precaution to avoid that philosophy was taken as a text-book (TLP, p. 27). So, instead of presenting philosophy as a kind of theory, he only purports to show the fly the way out of the bottle (PI § 309). Such commitment to a non-cognitive form of philosophy could bring some discomfort to someone who expects to collect from his teachings important hints to create a discussion in some determined field, and thus to get some more robust conclusions about, say, philosophy of language or some key linguistic concepts. The difficulty of dealing with a philosophy like Wittgenstein's consists in not getting answers at all. Questions directed to *what is* something or *how to do* something bounce against his texts and come back with empty hands: the only thing someone gets from this kind of approaching are bumps got by running against the limits of language (PI § 119).

There are no definitions of properties, no identifying statements, not a single universally applicable concept which could be useful for theoretical inquiries. There is no hint whatsoever regarding if there is an ultimate foundation in language, if that foundation is either social or mental, whether rules are purely inferential operations or socially imposed norms, if they depend essentially on transitory conventions or are as predictive as any lawlike statement, whether they are primarily mental, fixed, but leaving enough space to the employment of the free will, including the possibility of decisions which go against costumes or just deeply ingrained habits, or none of those characteristics. There are no suggestions about what are the more important ethical matters regarding norms and conventional rules. There is not even any concrete answer in Wittgenstein's philosophy about his own conceptual tools: what is definitively a language game, or what does it mean language to be a game, what is language *anyway* – if there is any at all. In the end, for someone looking for philosophical answers, her searching may become a letdown or, at best, a burning issue regarding what to do with a philosophy with no cognitive interest when we *do* have cognitive interests. Is he trying to suggest all the time that we should abandon philosophy?

Whatever the case, as definitions are something we cannot expect from Wittgenstein's texts, we could at least look for indications about some of his traditional

¹ Wittgenstein's texts are abbreviated as follows: PI – *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 2009); PPF – *Philosophy of Psychology, A Fragment* (Wittgenstein, 2009); TLP – *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein, 2005); VW – *The Voices of Wittgenstein* (Wittgenstein, 2003); PO – *Philosophical Occasions* (Wittgenstein, 1993); OC – *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein, 1969); M – *Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930-33* (Moore, 1966).

linguistic and philosophical concepts, as it is “rule”, “norm”, or “convention”. Indications could be useful for more improved conceptualizations in the future or employed to criticize the present ones. But it is possible, even on those cases, that the reader will be put in a place where she gets lost. In fact, Wittgenstein’s texts typically place the reader inside an inconclusive dialogical debate, and that position could bring her to a limit of no orientation whatsoever. They can bring about, to attentive readers, the same illusion effects caused by those ambiguous drawings of which his texts are so replete (TLP § 5.5432; PPF §§ 116, 118, 119, 151, 162, 179, 186, 205, 212; cf. Stern, 2004, p. 75). Aware of this situation, we could then legitimately ask: “So, what is the point in looking for suggestions about philosophical concepts in Wittgenstein?”

My purpose in this paper is to demonstrate what is the point to ask Wittgenstein what are “rules, norms, and conventions”. Although we will not reach any concrete answer from him, and could even get lost sometimes, we could have the opportunity to examine the advantages of an unprecedented philosophical method, that one whose form is “I don’t know my way about” (PI § 123). The experience of facing Wittgenstein’s texts keeps certain similarities with “plunging into the water of doubt” (PO, p. 119), or getting into a labyrinth of paths (PI § 203). But once his philosophical method is understood we can easily see uses and limits to profit from philosophical concepts like “rules, norms, and conventions”, and try to find our way around. We could even consider the bumps we eventually got in the meantime as real “discoveries” and appreciate their “value” (PI § 119).

Wittgenstein’s Writing

Wittgenstein is certainly among the most popular philosophers in 20th century philosophy. According to Monk (1991, pp. xvii-xviii), not only those unconcerned with his philosophy find him compelling, but, among those who admired him, we can find even people who wrote poems and novels, painted works inspired by him, composed music, and produced at least five television programs and two films around his thinking up to now. Of course, an ongoing industry, dedicated to publish articles and books commenting aspects of his philosophy, is pretty much flourishing: Monk records no fewer than 5,868 articles and books published up to 1989 (1991, p. xvii); but a quick survey on *Web of Science* now (2012) promptly shows an amount of 153 articles published on his philosophy just in 2011, which means that publishing keeps growing.

In spite of the fascination exerted by his philosophy (or, at least, by his personality), the content of Wittgenstein’s texts are also undoubtedly among the most difficult to interpret. Actually, his philosophy is not hard to read. Arduous reading in philosophy is generally related to an obscure language, like the way Hegel’s or Heidegger’s jargons and convoluted phrases are usually considered to be. About Hegel, Schopenhauer, for example, said:

(...) a colossal piece of mystification, which will yet provide posterity with an inexhaustible theme for laughter at our times, that it is a pseudo-philosophy paralyzing all mental powers, stifling all real thinking, and, by the most outrageous misuse of language, putting in its place the hollownest, most senseless, thoughtless, and, as is confirmed by its success, most stupefying verbiage... (1965, pp. 15-16)

Heidegger’s language fares no better according to a Literature Nobel Prizer like Bertrand Russell: “his philosophy is extremely obscure. One cannot help suspecting that language is here running riot” (1989, p. 303).

Clearly, Wittgenstein could also easily count among those so called obscure philosophers (cf. Cioffi, 1998, pp. 183-205), but it is important to observe that for

someone who believes so, this is probably due not to verbiage or complicated phraseology. In fact, already in the *Tractatus's* preface (TLP, p. 27) the author resolutely declares that “what can be said at all can be said clearly”. We do not have in Wittgenstein’s diaries (from where the vast majority of his writings come from) the kind of obscure language we find in Hegel’s or Heidegger’s texts. Contrary to that, Wittgenstein’s texts are written in the almost colloquial form required for a group of educated people to debate freely about philosophy. His typical philosophical passage makes the reader feel just like she was listening to a vividly philosophical conversation among graduate students in an university cafeteria. Since the greater part of his productions are texts extracted from his diaries, even when published in a more polished form as the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein’s writings show in effect a *polyphonic dialogism* (cf. Eagleton, 1982, pp. 76-81; Pichler, 2004, pp. 143-148; Medina, 2004, pp. 562-579; Soulez, 2005, pp. 313-325; Rudrum, 2006, pp. 210ss). They are plenty of different voices arguing in favor of opposite theses, just as someone could expect to read in a regular diary. The point is that Wittgenstein’s diaries do not deal with personal matters (although sometimes they do), but almost exclusively with philosophy. This brings the effect that we have in Wittgenstein’s work texts in which philosophy is not conveyed precisely by a regular book, the kind of work in which we expect to read the author’s voice. In his texts we find philosophy solely among the several debates we meet in the multiple polyphonic scenarios built throughout the pages. His writings have no systematicity, they are not ordered in a topic by topic manner, or in a chapter by chapter sequence usually found in a scientific discussion. A sequential argument, where the first statements serve as evidence or support for the next ones, i.e., a course of reasoning developed in a progressive manner, with a general statement to where all the previous set of statements are conducive, is almost absent in Wittgenstein’s textual corpus, to the exception perhaps of NL, TLP, BT, BB and the Dictates (VW). For almost all cases in the corpus philosophy is rather culled from the tensions generated by those discussions, usually through a negative form, generally indicating the limits of sense. The arguments are not even ordered as a collection of independent aphorisms as some others thinkers did in the past. They were mostly written through dialogues.

Such difference regarding a regular book became crucial in the *Investigations*. There Wittgenstein gave up his project to write a book and surrendered to the nature of his thought:

— Originally it was my intention to bring all this together in a book whose form I thought of differently at different times. But it seemed to me essential that in the book the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural, smooth sequence.

After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination. — And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For it compels us to travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought. — The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and meandering journeys.

The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made. Very many of these were badly drawn or lacking in character, marked by all the defects of a weak draughtsman. And when they were rejected, a number of half-way decent ones were left, which then had to be arranged and often cut down, in order to give the viewer an idea of the landscape. So this book is really just an album. (PI, preface, pp. 3-4).

So, polyphonic dialogism was a diary feature consecrated in PI as *the nature of the investigation*. It is remarkable that in the *Album* dialogism means confrontation, negotiation, creative engagement among opposed voices in order to find solutions – characteristics that do not belong necessarily to aphorisms. It is by this sole reason that his peculiar German in the *Investigations* is abundant in conversational emphatic expressions, like *doch!*, *eben*, *ja*, *je* or *gar*, and the different voices, exchanging among them a more personal form of treatment, signaled by the use of the German pronoun *du*, create an atmosphere of inconclusive discussions. So, in a Wittgensteinian text we will not get stumbles because of some strange word or any bizarre phraseology. We find now and then large paragraphs, consisting in a conclusive remark, coming from a supposedly judicious voice, which seem to close definitively the reflections. But no, the same observations can show up again at any point later, awaken surprisingly from a completely distinct perspective. Sometimes too, an exclusive voice seems to bring about an investigation, and again no – such voice is punctuated all the time by objections and sidesteps which seem to interrupt the reasoning, as there were other voices inside one's voice to break off linearity. So, it seems nothing uncommon happens in a Wittgensteinian text in PI, except for the fact that it is contaminated by an unexpected free conversational style.

Textual Style

Yet, why is it so difficult to interpret? In my opinion, all difficulties with Wittgenstein's texts are due precisely to their *style*. But it is important here to take style as a concept not related to idiosyncrasies. Its use here has nothing to do with a peculiar characteristic of the author, or is to be assumed as an expression of his character. PI's style in particular is not also to be reduced to an incidental deviation from accepted norms to write a book. Instead of a psychological concept used to explain some erratic connection between author and text, or differences occasioned by the employment of norms in a particular context, we can rather use "style" restricted to the textual corpus. From that perspective, a style means "a wedding between form and content" (Genova, 1979, p. 322), where the textual form is a function to its meaning. In other words, PI's style is an *operative form* inside the corpus in the sense of "what is being said cannot be divorced from how it is being said" (*idem*, p. 320). Clearly, not any form is operative in a text. It is perfectly indifferent if someone says, for example, "I am here" or "Here I am", unless such stylistic differences are functional to the meaning of the utterance. So, what I am trying to say is that Wittgenstein's textual style is grammatically related to his philosophical method. Unlike the argument put forward by Hilmy (1989, pp. 15-25), his style is not a casual deficiency on the part of the writer, and unlike the suggestion put forward by Cavell (2004, pp. 21-33), his style is not an expression of the writer's uneasiness with philosophy. These latter interpretations are weaved around some notion of a "signature view", usually connected to De Buffon's quotation "the style is the man himself". Regardless of the truth of those interpretations, coherence requires us to relate *meaning* and *use*, or *style* and *method*, and thus avoid psychology or sociology as explanations. If so, Wittgensteins' textual style is functional to its method in order to bring about surprise, displacement and strangeness. Through those devices his style is also operative to persuade the reader into not confusing philosophy and science. In other words, style here is to be taken as an inseparable item with regard to method. Thus, differently from Hegel and Heidegger's cases, difficulty of reading comes here exclusively as an effect of the method.

Trying to Find Our Way Around

Three important remarks must be made in regard to this dialogic style in order to try to find our way around and overcome difficulty of reading. The first two have to do with frustrating our expectations regarding a proper or a correct way of doing philosophy. In the first place, Wittgenstein's polyphonic dialogism must not be confused with Plato's or Hume's dialogical writings. In those traditional dialogical forms there is always one character who holds the true teaching: Socrates, for Plato, and Philo, for Hume. Both personalize the real or valid philosophy against illegitimate or incorrect ones. In Wittgenstein's dialogues, however, it is virtually impossible to ascribe to any voice the true teaching: "I can characterize my standpoint no better than by saying that it is the antithetical standpoint to the one occupied by Socrates in the Platonic dialogues", he once said to members of the Vienna Circle (VW, p. 33). If this is so, the dialogical strategy is made up to show – not to say – that any pretense universally valid philosophical explanation, conducted through the ardor of the discussions, finally meets some limit beyond which it is senseless. And precisely for this reason we should be more cautious and consider that it is for a methodological rather than a doctrinaire reason that philosophy is conceived by Wittgenstein as description instead of explanation (PI § 126). The dialogical strategies of his texts imply that a philosophical methodology is not a take-or-leave-it matter to the reader, even considering places where Wittgenstein speaks about conversion rather than conviction (OC §§ 97, 611-612). The reason is that a methodological procedure must not be confused with a general abrogation of philosophical theories. If we take seriously the dialogical method, the reader is left free to choose whatever form of philosophy she wants. It seems that Wittgenstein is much more interested in a critique of a scientific and technological ideology through his narratives than in suggesting a new way of thinking. His style indicates only inconclusive dialogues. In that situation any suggestion could be interpreted as intrusive to the reader and invalidating the methodological strategy. In short, despite appearances to the contrary, we cannot hastily conclude that he was proposing a new therapeutic philosophy, always ready to report philosophical mistakes of others. A therapeutic philosophy would not be a methodological procedure any more, but a disguised form of philosophical truth.

Not only the form of his dialogues are exceptional, but, in second place, maybe in opposition to Cavell's (1989, p. 38) or Glock's (1996, p.284) considerations, there are in the *Philosophical Investigations* not only two voices arguing, "temptation" and "correction", or "Wittgenstein" and "his interlocutor", but in several places we get three or even four different voices in altercation. None of them has a name, and, for that reason, they are easily confusable in the jungle of the debating threads (cf. Stern, 2004, pp. 74-75). The reader usually gets lost, because it is very difficult to point out to one constantly distinct voice on those dialogues (Rudrum, 2006, pp. 208-210). In the debate, thinking is submitted to a variety of thought experiments, but the judicious voice never refers to arguments' contents to accomplish its task, but to their form. In particular, to what we are generally doing with our philosophical conclusions.

Due to the difficulty brought about through those unparalleled dialogical forms in philosophy, there is also a third, we should say, side-effect, actually caused by the history of contemporary philosophy: interpreters created very distinct Wittgensteins throughout their commentaries. For this reason, it is not only highly problematic to pick up who is the philosopher speaking through the texts, but also, depending on the adopted perspective, reading is also biased by some scholarly beliefs and hypotheses.

Given all that embarrassment, it is not unusual today that some books initiate with a warning in order to clarify that they do not intend to say what Wittgenstein

thinking actually is, but only to discuss the bearing of his philosophy on the present philosophical discussions (cf. Whiting, 2010, pp. vi-vii). But it was not always like that among the scholarship. At first it seemed natural that there was only one Wittgenstein with two different approaches to philosophy: the earlier, attached to a metaphysics of logic and truth-functional analysis, always disposed to abandon philosophy, and the later, champion of theories like “meaning as use” and “language games”, who came from a change of mind after his return to philosophy in 1929, and wrote the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wiggins, 1997, is an example of that interpretation). But from the 1980’s up to now, the story became much more complex, and there was a proliferation of “many Wittgensteins”. Fogelin (1994, pp. 205-222) and Stern (2005) have referred to this point as a surprisingly unfolding of several different philosophies coming from the same texts. Stern (2005, pp. 172-174) lists 9 different authors of the *Investigations*, which, to say the least, shows a great lack of agreement about what is Wittgenstein’s philosophy. But despite this odd partitioning, which generally comes from regarding his thinking either as an anti-philosophy or a new form of doing philosophy, or, in other words, regardless Wittgenstein’s philosophy could legitimately be considered as a regular form of philosophy of language (Wiggins, 1997), a form of skepticism (Kripke, 1984; Fogelin, 1994), as a resolutism (Diamond, 1995; Conant & Diamond, 2004), as a conceptual therapy (Baker, 2004), or as a topography of grammar (Hacker, 2000; 2007), since all those interpretations are actually based on his texts, the best we could do before that is to come back again to his diaries and try to reactivate the dialogical effects from where all of them were built. Framing who is Wittgenstein is not but a subsequent reading result, a natural after-effect to be expected from the reader as another voice participating in the dialogue. However, any unilateral conclusion is always undetermined by data.

Rules, Norms, and Conventions in PI §§ 206-207

Let us gonna work now under the assumption that (a) language is a labyrinth of paths, (b) has a dialogical form, and (c) we usually get lost in there. But even though we have (d) to try to plow language (“We must plow through the whole of language” – PO, p. 131) and (e) reap the fruits.

The first thing to do if we want to know what Wittgenstein has to teach us about rules, norms and conventions, is to examine the whole section among §§ 185-241 of PI which is actually designed to discuss such matters. So, we should be entitled to scan all the 57 paragraphs to check the results. Nonetheless, such analytical procedure could not only lead us to 57 completely varied perspectives, but potentially multiply themselves throughout the whole of *Nachlass*, if we want to get a clearer and more distinct view PI does not give by itself. Instead of reaching a clearing in the jungle, however, we would be lost if we try this strategy. Even if we try to maintain ourselves restricted to *Investigations*, there are also scattered comments about rules all over PI which could bring about the same effect: §§ 31, 53-54, 69-70, 75, 79-81, 83, 85-86, 88, 98, 100, 125, 142, 162, 380, 562, 564, 567-568, 653. In fact, such method of investigation is clearly in opposition to PI’s preface recommendations, which urges us read the text as an *album* rather than a book. Given such parameter, the best we can do is to go to some remark, and let this sketch of a landscape “compel us to travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought” (PI, p. 3). PI’s method has certain similarity with Freud’s psychoanalytical free-association. So, by free-association we should expect to get the *a posteriori* effects that put us to travel if we only concentrate in one of the *album*’s remarks.

Let's start with two paragraphs from PI which seem to be very appropriate to show us what we can get from investigating rules, norms, and conventions:

Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. One is trained to do so, and one reacts to an order in a particular way. But what if one person reacts to the order and training *thus*, and another *otherwise*? Who is right, then?

Suppose you came as an explorer to an unknown country with a language quite unknown to you. In what circumstances would you say that people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on?

Shared human behavior is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.

Let's imagine that the people in that country carried on usual human activities and in the course of them employed, apparently, an articulate language. If we watch their activities, we find them intelligible, they seem 'logical'. But when we try to learn their language, we find it impossible to do so. For there is no regular connection between what they say, the sounds they make, and their activities; but still these sounds are not superfluous, for if, for example, we gag one of these people, this has the same consequences as with us: without those sounds their actions fall into confusion – as I feel like putting it.

Are we to say that these people have a language: orders, reports, and so on?

There is not enough regularity for us to call it "language".

What do we have here? Someone formulates a thesis: rule-following is definitively connected with a social constraint or imposition: we have to obey an order, and, to do so, we are trained to react in a certain way. However, suddenly thinking changes its direction with the unwarned intromission of a "but".

It is not always that different voices are clearly separated in distinct utterances, between quotation marks, or after a dash in PI's corpus. As I said before, sometimes we have to consider an unexpected interruption of reasoning in an argument as a different voice. This time it came with an adversative conjunction: What happens if two people react differently on the basis of the same order and training? The only basis we have to adopt the sociological thesis is a regular reaction. In the absence of a regularity, then *what*? Here questioning came from the skeptical voice.

The answer comes in the form of a thought experiment. Incidentally it is similar to the one proposed years later by Quine (1960, pp. 28ss) to defend "radical translation". In Quine's book a field linguist, faced with a language completely unknown to her, is forced to rely solely on the observed behavior of the speakers in order to translate the word "Gavagai". There is always some indeterminacy, maintains Quine, because even if she knows, by observing behavior, that the word refers to "a rabbit", it is impossible to determine exactly what in relation to a rabbit is actually being said. So, a variety of different dictionaries could be proposed, but all of them consistent only with behavioral evidence, but disagreeing with each other. Then, different linguistic theories would have to dispute for the best – but not definitively – explanation.

Nonetheless, the voice speaks here of "shared human behavior" as a "system of reference". Our thought experiment requests something more than solely context to accomplish a translation: We all (us and them) have to share a common ground. This mysterious something is actually the basis of interpretation. Are we here passing from Quine's radical translation to Davidson's radical interpretation? Is the common ground thesis also the basis by which we should have to interpret distinct reactions to the same order and training, thus eliminating skepticism? What is this something? We do not know. We do not even know which voice introduced the thought experiment, the first and sociological voice, or a third or mentalist voice (as "behavior" is equated here to a "system").

Then, another voice, and another thought experiment. This time, an attempt to put into question the common ground thesis. The people in the foreign country only seems to share our system (logic?), but soon we discover that there is not enough regularity to sustain the common ground thesis, neither in a behavioral nor in a logical argument – although we can see that they seem to be consistent among themselves. For that reason, our common ground argument seems just like another of our illusions.

The result is that “rules, norms, and conventions” make sense sometimes, either in a mentalist or a sociological thesis, but not always and in all occasions.

What Did We Get?

Thinking in terms of norms to explain regularity serves well to purposes favoring sociological theses. Those theorists take training and habits as cornerstones to their arguments. But we cannot fully explain behavior only this way, because mentalists have a point. It is virtually impossible to imagine language without logic. So, we have to impose our transcendental regularities into experience, so to say, in order to understand apparently irrational behavior. But, as such metaphysics has also an end somewhere, there are situations where we will be deprived even from that instrument we call “language”. So, thinking in terms of logic serves well to purposes favoring mentalist theses – but only in a limited number of cases.

Sociologism and mentalism regarding rules are here but *grammars*. They are experimental sciences only up to a certain limit. Their theories are induced from observed behavior and make predictive universal statements, but after some point they become pure philosophy. At this point, they cannot be falsifiable any more, things could not be different with regard to their explanations. Thus, their arguments become circular when they get a limit beyond which they are senseless. Even the concept of language must serve some purpose and could become senseless if it reached some limit.

In order to keep dialogue alive and negotiate among the different parties, we are entitled to know our respective limits. Such task naturally requires arduous reflection and open ears to the opposed theses. This is the best way in order to not get stuck into the fly-bottle.

In fact, an attentive reading of a Wittgensteinian text brings about reflection on our own philosophical positions with respect to their limits of sense. Not a word is suggested to abandon our arguments or to give up philosophy at all. The text is therapeutic because of its method, but there is no therapeutic philosophy competing in the market as well as it is virtually impossible to determine who, among those voices, really represents Wittgenstein.

The point of asking Wittgenstein what are “rules, norms, and conventions” is to come back to the purposes of our questions, to know the limits of our conceptual tools, and to engage in our dialogical altercations in a more prepared way. We do not find Wittgenstein, we find only a dialogical text. So philosophy goes here as an instrument to help to avoid useless metaphysics. But, as we do not gather suggestions from Wittgenstein, our integrity is preserved and our creativity is stimulated as people who can think by ourselves our own problems.

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