

Wittgenstein on the Possibility of Philosophy: The Importance of an Intercultural Approach

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1. The Entanglement of Philosophy with Mythology and Language

Wittgenstein (1993) writes in his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* (RFGB):

An entire mythology is stored within our language. (RFGB, p. 133)

In his *Golden Bough*, Frazer's (1922) interprets the customs of all cultures as applications of more or less sophisticated hypotheses about the world as if all human behavior was either magic, or religion, or science and the latter two were merely primitive forms of science. Wittgenstein regards this interpretation as unsuitable for capturing the diverse meanings of the very different myths and customs. Moreover, he takes Frazer's approach to explanation itself to be completely misled. The harsh rejection of Frazer's method in the RFGB casts doubts on Wittgenstein's expectation to learn anything new about the myths of other cultures from reading Frazer. However, he surely expected - among other issues one of which I will consider soon - to learn something about myths. Not about the myths of other people, but about the myths stored in the English language. Although Frazer did not intend to give evidence for them, he revealingly makes use of terms like »ghost«, »shade«, »soul« and »spirit«. Wittgenstein thinks that these terms derive their meaning from the mythology stored in language and that »much too little« is made from the fact that we count these words »as part of our educated vocabulary« (RFGB, p. 133).

The use of these words can not only lead to misinterpretations of unknown customs, but also create an incorrect understanding of philosophical problems. For a crucial concern for the possibility of philosophy is how we can prevent being led astray by the myths stored within our language. Wittgenstein does not believe that in philosophy we can simply eliminate all critical terms, replace them by neutral ones, or make use of a »clean« non-ordinary language. Even in the attempt to free language from myths, we have to use non-neutral, potentially myth-laden terms. How can we prevent being caught in the same myths we try to free ourselves from?

Furthermore there is the problem that - following Wittgenstein - grammar itself suggests certain views on philosophical problems and thereby might tempt us to pursue wrong views. Since in philosophy we have to use language, we cannot pursue a view independent from its »temptations«. We are always in danger of inventing some »myth« (Wittgenstein 1963 (PI), §138) because we follow the suggestions of grammar. Thus, how can we find an approach to philosophical problems that goes beyond the entanglements of our language and does not lead us on the tracks of philosophical myths?

Wittgenstein explored the possibility of such an approach precisely in his remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough* - this is the other reason considered here for his occupation with Frazer's work for many years. Frazer's failure in ethnology can teach us something for philosophy since Wittgenstein believes there is a close commonality

between the approaches of both. In *Culture and Value* he writes:

If we use the ethnological approach does that mean we are saying philosophy is ethnology? No, it only means we are taking up our position far outside, in order to see the things *more objectively*. (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 45e)

Wittgenstein underlined the article within his expression »the things« by a wavy line to express his doubts on the correctness of this word. He does not intend to say that there is a given set of objects (»the things«) independently of our recognizing them. For the same reason he does not speak of »seeing things objectively«, but of seeing them »*more objectively*«. In the German original, this is expressed by only one word (»objektiver«). If Wittgenstein had written in English, he might as well have written »*more objectively*« to emphasize there is not one single objective approach (compare e.g. §133 of the PI) but nevertheless there is a *more objective* approach. This *more objective* approach is what Wittgenstein calls »the ethnological approach«. In the next section I will explore why culture is important for this approach and in section three why it is an intercultural approach.

2. The Role of Cultures and Forms of Life for Philosophy

Wittgenstein does not propose to replace philosophy by ethnology. But there are parallels in the approaches both can take. A first parallel should be clear from the remarks above: Both have to treat myths: Ethnology, because it explores the myths of other people. Philosophy, because it has to disengage from (pre-)philosophical myths. Both have to go beyond the entanglements of the own language but at the same time use it.

This is related to a very particular kinship between ethnology and philosophy: For both, culture is a special concern. By »culture« I mean the ways of doing things we find in one, several, or all human communities. Wittgenstein very rarely used the term »culture«, since at his time it was not commonly used to describe the ordinary ways of acting. In general, Wittgenstein was very careful in using words that might be interpreted as technical terms. But in some cases, he famously did use the term »form of life« which stands for an intimately related concept. As Glock (1996, p. 125) points out:

»To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life« (PI §§7, 19). In *Blue and Brown Books* 134, to imagine a language is equated with imagining a »culture«. Accordingly, a form of life is a culture or social formation, the totality of communal activities into which language-games are embedded.

From the experienced actuality of different cultures it is obvious that more than only one culture is imaginable. The parallel use of »form of life« suggests that we can imagine more than but one human form of life. Many philosophers do not like to admit to this because it thwarts their attempts to find an unmovable foundation for meaning. I do not intend to argue here against this position since I did so in a

recent publication (Durt, forthcoming). There, I explained how Wittgenstein avoids strong forms of relativism by searching for overlapping commonalities which enable intercultural understanding. Here, I merely presuppose that it is possible to *imagine* different cultures and forms of life. Since for Wittgenstein meaning is founded on cultural forms of behavior, different languages go along with different forms of cultural behavior. This allows for understanding how seemingly incomprehensible concepts are possible: they are used in different forms of life or cultures. Imagining different cultures enables us to imagine essentially different concepts. This way, we might be able to imagine other concepts of »soul« and »spirit«, or essentially different forms of counting that might lead to a different mathematics. This would not mean to imagine an arbitrary mathematics; the imagined concepts are not all a matter of convention. The very fact that they are rooted in a culture shows they have to »fit« in it and should not evoke too many contradictions with other concepts; this would disturb the interplay. On the other hand, they don't belong to an eternal third world of ideas completely independent of human activities. This holds for imagining a different culture as much as for the related case of imagining a different education, for which Wittgenstein writes in his *Zettel*:

387. I want to say: an education quite different from ours might also be the foundation for quite different concepts.

388. For here life would run on differently. - What interests us would not interest *them*. Here different concepts would no longer be unimaginable. In fact, this is the only way in which *essentially* different concepts are imaginable. (Wittgenstein 1967b, p. 69e)

3. Wittgenstein's Intercultural Approach to Philosophy

But is Wittgenstein in the above citation not committing a self-refuting *contradictio in adjecto*? Are *essentially* different concepts not that different that they are other concepts? Why should we call an *essentially* different »mathematics« still »mathematics« and not seize it under a different concept? With »*essentially* different«, Wittgenstein could not mean »completely different«. But how can we understand the essentially different concepts as connected to the concepts familiar to us? To understand the essentially different language games with our language games, there must be a connecting link between our concepts and those being essentially different. Wittgenstein thinks that we can find such connecting links or intermediate cases (*Zwischenglieder*) and use them for a description he calls *Übersichtliche Darstellung* (perspicuous representation):

The concept of perspicuous representation is of fundamental importance for us. It denotes the form of our representation, the way we see things. (A kind of »World-view« as it is apparently typical of our time. Spengler.)

This perspicuous representation brings about the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we »see the connections«. Hence the importance of finding *connecting links*. (*RFGB*, p. 133)

In the German original:

Der Begriff der übersichtlichen Darstellung ist für uns von grundlegender Bedeutung. Er bezeichnet unsere Darstellungsform, die Art, wie wir die Dinge sehen. (Eine

Art der »Weltanschauung« wie sie scheinbar für unsere Zeit typisch ist. Spengler.)

Diese übersichtliche Darstellung vermittelt das Verständnis, welches eben darin besteht, daß wir die »Zusammenhänge sehen«. Daher die Wichtigkeit des Findens von *Zwischengliedern*. (*RFGB*, p. 132)

It does not matter if the *Zwischenglieder* are found or invented. Contrary to Frazer's attempt to explain the historical origin of strange customs, Wittgenstein wants to give a description that reveals the resemblance of facts. His interest is not to provide scientific explanations by putting forward hypotheses of how the custom developed. Instead, he wants to describe it in a way that makes it comprehensible to people of our culture. Merely to use the concepts of our culture would not capture the strange concepts. If we want to comprehend them, we have to relate them to our concepts.

Finding and inventing connecting links allows grasping essentially different concepts. This is important for Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy in general. In the *PI*, Wittgenstein uses a formulation nearly identical to the above citation from the *RFGB*:

[...] A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in »seeing connexions«. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate cases*.

The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things. (Is this a »Weltanschauung«?) (*PI*, §122)

In the German original:

[...] Die übersichtliche Darstellung vermittelt das Verständnis, welches eben darin besteht, daß wir die »Zusammenhänge sehen«. Daher die Wichtigkeit des Findens und des Erfindens von *Zwischengliedern*.

Der Begriff der übersichtlichen Darstellung ist für uns von grundlegender Bedeutung. Er bezeichnet unsere Darstellungsform, die Art, wie wir die Dinge sehen. (Ist dies eine »Weltanschauung«?) (*PI*, §122)

In the German original the citations are even more similar. The only major differences are that the order of the sentences was reversed and the reference to Spengler in the *RFGB* was replaced with a question in the *PI*. Most significantly, in his *RFGB* Wittgenstein does not speak of invention of *Zwischenglieder*. However, in the following sentences of the *RFGB*, he gives the example of gradually converting an ellipse into a circle as a »hypothetical« *Zwischenglied* which can be just as well found as invented. We can assume that already in the *RFGB* Wittgenstein thought about *Zwischenglieder* in this way.

But why are Wittgenstein's attempts to present perspicuous presentations of different concepts an intercultural approach? The word parts »über« and »sicht« (english: »over« and »view«, together: »survey«) in Wittgenstein's term »Übersichtliche Darstellung« might suggest he meant a view from above and not between cultures. Accordingly, in the English version of the *Philosophical Remarks*, »Übersichtliche Darstellung« was translated with »bird's eye view« (Wittgenstein 1975, I §1).

But the *Übersichtliche Darstellung* is not an objective explanation. Rather, it is a description coming from *our* language and culture and therefore not free of its myths and temptations. However, it is more objective than

the view from merely one culture since it embraces the viewpoints of different cultures. The *Zwischenglieder* help to link the viewpoints of different cultures and to comprehend the connections between essentially different concepts. They are not located merely on the side of either the one or the other culture, but stand between them.

In his attempt to give an *Übersichtliche Darstellung*, Wittgenstein does not try to find a position above the different cultures. Instead, his approach takes a course between cultures, it is an intercultural approach. Wittgenstein used it in his numerous examples of different cultures in the *PI*, the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, and other works. He does not think that in philosophy we can put ourselves into a position free of the temptations of myth and grammar. We cannot simply leave behind ordinary language and its cultural foundations. But his philosophical method shows how to untangle from some of the temptations: By taking the intercultural approach.

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