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Introduction to Wittgenstein

12th lecture 12.11.2019:
On Certainty;
Cultural relativism?

Knowledge - Doubt -
Certainty

Absolutely certain knowledge in logic and mathematics?

- Is there absolute knowledge? Is there fundamental knowledge? Isn't *logic* expressing such knowledge?
 - Cf. TLP: Logic does *not* contain the most general truths about the world (which we possibly can discover step by step, but maybe never fully discover). Logic is nothing but the formal properties of scientific and any other knowledge, the structure of knowledge itself. Thus, logic is not more fundamental than any knowledge and cannot therefore be the basis for it.
- What about mathematics?

Absolutely certain knowledge in common sense?

See 'Moore's propositions' (G.E. Moore: *A Defence of Common Sense*, 1925):

"I begin, then, with **my list of truisms, every one of which (in my own opinion) I know, with certainty, to be true.** ... **There exists at present a living human body, which is my body.** This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes; it was, for instance, much smaller when it was born, and for sometime afterwards, than it is now. **Ever since it was born, it has been either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth;** and, at every moment since it was born, there have also existed many other things having shape and size in three dimensions (in the same familiar way in which it has), ... **there have, at every moment since its birth, been large numbers of other living human bodies,** each of which has, like it, a) at some time born b) continued to exist at some time after birth c) been, at every moment of its life after birth, either in contact with or not far from the surface of earth; and many of these bodies have already died and ceased to exist before I was born. **But the earth has existed long also for many years long before my body was born:** and for many of these years, also, large numbers of human bodies had died and ceased to exist before it was born."

But do Moore's propositions express *knowledge*?

246. In what sense are my sensations *private*? — Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it. — In one way this is wrong, and in another nonsense. **If we are using the word "to know" as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am in pain.**—Yes, but all the same not with the certainty with which I know it myself!—**It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain. ...**

- "Only I can know ..." as a statement which is false:
 - There are others who can and do know as well.
- "Only I can know ..." as a statement which is nonsense:
 - I can only «know» the things which I also can *doubt*.
- **Domain of knowledge = domain of doubt.**

The possibility of doubt presupposes logical hinges, certainties

- But also: Doubt is only possible there where we also hold some things for certain:
 - Doubting p presupposes non-doubting q ; doubt is possible only in the context of a specific practice which also includes non-doubt.
- **Universal doubt is not possible.**
- There are always *some* things which we consider certain: «hinges», «feststehende Sätze», «certainties» ...: they are the «river-bed» (OC §97) which delimits the domain of knowledge and doubt.

Hinge propositions ("feststehende Sätze")

There are always *some propositions* which we consider certain:

- ... the questions that we raise and our doubts depend upon the fact that **some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.**

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted.

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just can't investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. **If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.** (OC §§341-343)

Which propositions we consider certain is not a matter of knowledge and proof:

- **We don't, for example, arrive at any of them as a result of investigation.** There are e.g. historical investigations and investigations into the shape and also the age of the earth, but not into whether the earth has existed during the last hundred years. (OC §138)
 - E.g., we don't arrive at the proposition "The external world exists" via an investigation.

On Certainty §1

(http://wittgensteinsource.org/Ms-172,1_f)

- If you do know that *here is one hand*,¹ we'll grant you all the rest.

When one says that such and such a proposition can't be proved, of course that does not mean that it can't be derived from other propositions; any proposition can be derived from other ones. **But they may be no more certain than it is itself.** (On this a curious remark by H. Newman.)

¹See G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. XXV, 1939; also "A Defence of Common Sense" in *Contemporary British Philosophy, 2nd Series*, Ed. J. H. Muirhead, 1925. Both papers are in Moore's *Philosophical Papers*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1959. *Editors*. See G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. XXV, 1939; also "A Defence of Common Sense" in *Contemporary British Philosophy, 2nd Series*, Ed. J. H. Muirhead, 1925. Both papers are in Moore's *Philosophical Papers*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1959. *Editors*.

Some hinges are empirical propositions which have been turned into rules

The justification of the proposition $25 \times 25 = 625$ is, naturally, that if anyone has been trained in such-and-such a way, then under normal circumstances he gets 625 as the result of multiplying 25 by 25. But **the arithmetical proposition** does not assert that. **It is so to speak an empirical proposition hardened into a rule.** It stipulates that the rule has been followed only when that is the result of the multiplication. **It is thus withdrawn from being checked by experience, but now serves as a paradigm for judging experience.** (RFM Part VI, §23)

The river-bed metaphor

- OC §97: ... I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.
- The hinge propositions / hinges (the things I cannot 'know') are like the river-bed; the empirical propositions (the things I can doubt and 'know') are like the water within the river-bed.

«Hinge *propositions*» vs. hinges

NB.: Our certainties do not need to be all of a propositional nature.

Partly, they are of a non-propositional, practical nature or include «extremely general facts of nature» (PI §142) which we don't always capture in propositions.

We don't, for example, arrive at any of them as a result of investigation ... → How can we then make sure that our (epistemological, moral ...) hinges / certainties are correct / the correct ones)?

“The fact that we attribute rain to meteorological causes alone while savages believe that Gods or ghosts or magic can influence the rainfall ... does not show that we “think more logically” than savages ... I did not come to this conclusion [that rain has physical causes] myself by observation and inference and have, in fact, little knowledge of the meteorological processes that lead to rain; I merely accept what everybody else in my society accepts, namely that rain is due to natural causes. This particular idea formed part of my culture long before I was born into it and little more was required of me than sufficient linguistic ability to learn it. ... It would be absurd to say that the savage is thinking mystically and that we are thinking scientifically about rainfall.” (Evans-Pritchard, in: *“Lévy-Bruhl's Theory of Primitive Mentality”* (1934))

Relativism?

Can we rely on a
universal system of
hinges?

On Certainty

- OC §105. **All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system.**
- OC §609. Supposing we met people who did not regard that as a telling reason. Now, how do we imagine this? **Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle. (And for that we consider them primitive.) Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it?—If we call this "wrong" aren't we using **our** language-game as a base from which to **combat theirs**?**
- OC §610. And are we right or wrong to combat it? Of course there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings.
- OC §611. Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic.
- OC §612. I said I would 'combat' the other man,—but wouldn't I give him *reasons*? Certainly; but how far do they go? **At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)**

Thus, are all hinges relative to specific systems, cultures, *Weltbilder*?

- We have different language games, forms of life, *world pictures* ... Neither knowledge nor certainties are fixed once for all ... All certainties are relative to a specific time and place ...
- If all certainties, beliefs, truths, standards, arguments, criteria, concepts... (1) are relative to and valid only within the «Weltbild» / the system they belong to, and (2) also the «hinges» of these *Weltbilder* / systems have validity only in relation to the *Weltbild* / system they belong to,

... aren't we then getting some strong relativism?

- The strong relativist (strong perspectivist) conclusion: «Everything is relative to your point of view. And since everything is relative to your point of view, there will be no point of view-independent standards, criteria, truths, concepts, values. And therefore, if we have different points of view, we cannot understand each other. And therefore, moreover, none of our points of view will have any privilege over others, and all views and points of views will be equally valid.»

Strong cultural relativism: Cf. the following five claims by moral relativists

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society.
3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's. **There are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.**
4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many.
5. It is arrogant for us to judge other cultures. We should always be tolerant of them.

Quoted from: Rachels & Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (2012), p. 16

The five claims as applied to epistemology

1. Different societies have different epistemological (science) codes.
2. The epistemological code of a society determines what is true within that society; that is, if the epistemological code of a society says that a certain statement is true, then that statement is true, at least within that society.
3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's. **There are no truths that hold for all people at all times.**
4. The epistemological code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many.
5. It is arrogant of us to disagree with other epistemological belief systems. We should always be epistemologically tolerant of them (= say, that they are epistemologically equally correct).

Wittgenstein: A cultural relativist?

”Soft” vs. ”strong” cultural relativism

- ”Soft” / «inclusive» / «moderate» cultural relativism: Certainties, beliefs, truths, concepts, standards of rationality ... are relative to the «Weltbild» which they are embedded in. But this does not imply that it is not possible to build bridges between the different systems / „Weltbilder“ / cultures, and thus, that it is not possible to learn to understand each other.
- ”Strong” / «exclusive» / «extreme» cultural relativism: Certainties, beliefs, truths, standards of rationality ... are relative to the «Weltbild» which they are embedded in. This does, where we don't sufficiently share certainties, beliefs, truths, concepts ..., imply **that it is not possible to build bridges between the different systems / „Weltbilder“ / cultures, and thus, that it is not possible to learn to understand each other.**
 - Cf. Sapir–Whorf hypothesis

Is Wittgenstein a strong cultural relativist?

- If language is at home in language games, forms of life and practice(s), and knowledge and certainties and beliefs are at home in specific «Weltbilder» - doesn't this suggest that communication between *different* language games and «Weltbilder» (cultures) is not possible?
 - Does Wittgenstein's notion of language game imply independence and incomparability / incommensurability / incompatibility of language games?
 - Is Wittgenstein's account of language and communication failing to account for the possibility and actuality of intercultural communication?

AP: No – Wittgenstein is no (strong) cultural relativist

1) Does Wittgenstein's notion of language game imply independence and incomparability / incommensurability / incompatibility of language games?

➤ No.

2) Is Wittgenstein's account of language and communication failing to account for the possibility and actuality of intercultural communication?

➤ No.

Ad 1): Throwing out some misconceptions first

- Human language is *not* a sum of autonomous and separated language games (cf. family resemblance).
- Human form of life is *not* a sum of autonomous and separated human forms of lives (cf. family resemblance).
- The domain of concepts is *not* made up of autonomous and separated conceptual subdomains / subsystems (cf. family resemblance).
- NB: The middle Wittgenstein game analogy can be *misleading*.

Ad 2) Intercultural communication is possible – and a fact

- Not only does W. not support strong cultural relativism - we can even extract an argument from Wittgenstein against (a variant of) strong cultural relativism:
 - Some strong cultural relativism bases on the assumption that communication and the establishing of communication are dependent on shared *rationality*.
 - Wittgenstein not only questions this assumption, but also shows that it is wrong.

«... Even where no shared concepts and rationality are not in place, they can still be developed.»

Wittgenstein's prime example: The learning of one's first language

- As infants can develop an understanding for the language and culture they are born into (without yet sharing the concepts of the language and the rationality of the culture they are born into), adults can develop an understanding for other cultures' languages and rationalities without needing to already sufficiently possess these concepts and rationalities in advance.

Shared ways of behaving

Primitive reactions

- RPP I: §915: Here it is a help to remember that it is a **primitive reaction** to take care of, to treat, the place that hurts when someone else is in pain, and not merely when one is so oneself—hence it is a primitive reaction to attend to the pain-behavior of another, as, also, *not* to attend to one's own pain-behavior.
- RPP I: §916. What, however, is the word "primitive" meant to say here? Presumably, that the mode of behavior is *pre-linguistic*: **that a language-game is based *on it*: that it is the prototype of a mode of thought and not the result of thought.**
 - But see also: PI §656: ... **Sieh auf das Sprachspiel als das *Primäre*! Und auf die Gefühle, etc. als auf eine Betrachtungsweise, eine Deutung, des Sprachspiels! ...**

Shared ways of acting

PI § 206 (English)

206. Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. We are trained to do so; we react to an order in a particular way. But what if one person reacts in one way and another in another to the order and the training? Which one is right?

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

The **common behaviour of mankind** is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.

PI § 206 (German)

206. ... Denke, du kämst als Forscher in ein unbekanntes Land mit einer dir gänzlich fremden Sprache. Unter welchen Umständen würdest du sagen, daß die Leute dort **Befehle geben, Befehle verstehen, befolgen, sich gegen Befehle auflehnen**, u.s.w.?

Die **gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise** ist das Bezugssystem, mittels welches wir uns eine fremde Sprache deuten.

”gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise“: Common to whom?

- Common to the observed only? - Common to the observed *and* the observer? - **Common to mankind?**
 - ”gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise“: There are shared ways of human acting. Or, at least: Wherever intercultural communication works, it is thanks to shared ways of **acting** (rather than shared concepts / shared rationality!).
- NB: «Handlungsweise» means different things, including «complex», «composed» actions, action sequences – thus not only simple actions.

Giving and following orders as human universals

- Ms-165,108: Befehlen ist eine Technik unsrer Sprache.
Wer in ein fremdes Land käme dessen Sprache er nicht versteht wird im allgemeinen unschwer herausfinden, wann ein Befehl gegeben wurde.
- Ms-165,109 f: Ist es aber genug daß Einer etwas sagt & ein anderer irgend etwas tut, daß ein Befehl befolgt werde? Worin besteht das Phänomen des Befehlens & Gehorchens? Es ist **eine Technik des menschlichen Lebens & unserer Sprache. Es ist schwer oder unmöglich eine allgemeine Beschreibung, aber leicht, Beispiele dieser Technik zu geben.**
- Ms-124,208ff: In den Reaktionen auf einen Befehl muß es **Gleichförmigkeit** geben.
- PI §25: ... Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much **a part of our natural history** as walking, eating, drinking, playing.

There is «pre-conceptual» communication

The power of giving an example (PI §208)

208. Then am I defining "order" and "rule" by means of "regularity"?—How do I explain the meaning of "regular", "uniform", "same" to anyone?—I shall explain these words to someone who, say, only speaks French by means of the corresponding French words. **But if a person has not yet got the concepts, I shall teach him to use the words by means of examples and by practice.**—And when I do this I do not communicate less to him than I know myself.

In the course of this teaching I shall shew him the same colours, the same lengths, the same shapes, I shall make him find them and produce them, and so on. I shall, for instance, get him to continue an ornamental pattern uniformly when told to do so.—And also to continue progressions. And so, for example, when given: to go on:

I do it, he does it after me; and I influence him by expressions of agreement, rejection, expectation, encouragement. I let him go his way, or hold him back; and so on.

There is «pre-conceptual» communication

Understanding vs. Interpreting (PI § 201)

- 201. This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.

It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shews is that **there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call "obeying the rule" and "going against it" in actual cases.**

Hence there is an inclination to say: every action according to the rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term "interpretation" to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another.

There is «pre-conceptual» communication» Language learning (PI §32)

32. ... Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already think, only not yet speak.

Summarizing: Why
Wittgenstein rather does
not support cultural
relativism

There are some philosophically relevant anthropological facts

- Humans not only share a **pre-rational, pre-linguistic and pre-conceptual basis**, incl. primitive reactions (see Moyal-Sharrock 2010), but they also manifest **shared ways of acting**.
- At the bottom and in the heart of the understanding between humans are shared practices and acting.
- The fact that infants can learn adults' language, concepts and practices – without yet possessing the adults' concepts and rationality – shows that it is possible to develop intercultural understanding “from scratch”, by joining in.
- Joining-in becomes possible through **training** (“*Abrichten*”) in practices and does thus not require an already existing shared cognitive and rational fundament.
- Humans are capable of joining-in practices after being given **examples**.
- There seems to be a sufficiently common “**human form of life**” which makes us *share* ways of responding to teaching and training.