

Solitude, Culture, and the Technology of Communication

Zsuzsanna Kondor

Philosophical Investigations was first published in 1953. It is, of course, widely regarded as the most important posthumous publication of Wittgenstein, containing the main elements of his later philosophy.¹ *Prints and Visual Communication*, the work of William M. Ivins Jr., was published in the same year. The main topics of these two books are quite different, but in both we can find a critique of Plato's philosophy. In what follows I would like to compare these critical considerations - with each other, but also against the background of Ernest Gellner's notion of "abstract universalistic individualism" and the rival position which he calls "romantic communalism".

I will first recall, very briefly, Wittgenstein's criticism of Plato in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and then describe Gellner's historically oriented point of view of the above-mentioned traditions in philosophy. Finally, I shall cite arguments by Ivins concerning Plato which - I hope to show - offer an alternative to the dualism represented by Gellner.

Wittgenstein quotes these sentences from the *Theaetetus*:

"If I make no mistake, I have heard some people say this: there is no definition of the primary elements - so to speak - out of which we and everything else are composed; for everything that exists in its own right can only be *named*, no other determination is possible, neither that it is nor that it is not. . . . But what exists in its own right has to be named . . . without any other determination. In consequence it is impossible to give an account of any primary element; for it, nothing is possible but the bare name; its name is all it has. But just as what consists of these primary elements is itself complex, so the name of the elements become descriptive language by being compounded together. For the essence of speech is the composition of names." (PI § 46)

In the course of the next paragraphs Wittgenstein calls attention to difficulties which arise when we think of language along the lines Socrates understood it in the *Theaetetus*, i.e. when we consider "speech" as if it was "the composition of names". Distinguishing between composite and simple elements (PI § 47), essential and inessential features of an object (PI § 62), as well as the existence and non-existence of the object of a proposition (PI § 79) create unsolvable anomalies. These anomalies can

be eliminated only by adopting a basically different conception of language. Such conception of language is put forward in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein - as opposed to that of the *Tractatus*. According to the *Philosophical Investigations* the only authentic approach to language is given through its use - not through distinctions and concepts formulated with the help of some abstract logic.² Traditional concepts of logic such as sentence, word, and symbol are defined from a new perspective, in a wider context, i.e. in the light of linguistic usage. "[T]he meaning of a word is its use in the language." (PI § 43)

"Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses."³ (PI § 18) Language is not a static phenomenon it is changing in the course of its use. "[T]he speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life." The term "language-game" emphasises this fact.⁴ The so-called "private language argument"⁵ emphasises the communal character of language, i.e. the fact that speaking a language means obeying rules⁶ - agreement in definitions and implicit presuppositions⁷ which gain sense only in a community.

The very idea that language is a form of life⁸ implicitly involves that language is closely bounded to culture. But Wittgenstein is not concerned with culture directly. His main interest relates to philosophical questions such as meaning, understanding, sentence, concept of logic, foundations of mathematics, sensory data and the opposition of idealism and realism.⁹

Gellner unambiguously places Wittgenstein's later philosophy in the tradition of "romantic communalism", contrasting it with the *Tractatus* which he sees as representing the tradition of abstract individualism.¹⁰ By this contrasting of philosophical traditions Gellner can relate Wittgenstein's philosophy to a given cultural-political situation. According to Gellner's interpretation Wittgenstein tries to find a way out from the solitude into which atomistic individualism has led. He doesn't succeed, the pursuit of the way out leads to another kind of solitude. The pursuit of Wittgenstein mirrors the intellectual and political atmosphere of Kakania, i.e. the Habsburg empire.

"...what does make sense is that, having worked out one philosophy in terms of abstract and universal reason and having found that it led to intolerable solitude, he replaced it by another philosophy, inspired by the one thing which, in the pervasive atmosphere of Kakania, was widely recognised to be the alternative to reason: namely roots. Roots, not logical form, dictate our speech and confer our identity on us and limit our world. He renamed it 'a form of life'."(Gellner 1998, 106)

Atomistic individualism, that is the Crusoe tradition which started - according to Gellner's opinion¹¹ - with Descartes, sees human knowledge as developing step by step due to the intellectual effort of the individual. It doesn't take into account either communal or institutional circumstances as regards cognition. Human beings gain knowledge by their own cognitive efforts and/or private experiences. Acquisition of knowledge is possible only through abstract, distinct, and well-defined concepts, in the course of some systematic process. By contrast romantic communalism stresses the pervasive power of tradition, culture and community. This tradition has a much older history than the other, but became systematised only later.

"Once upon a time mankind lived, by and large, in closed intimate communities, governed by practices simultaneously geared both to maintaining internal order and adjusting to nature The criteria adapted for judging the acceptability of practices ... were, so to speak, self-validating, traditional. They were not systematised; no attempt was to deduce them either from some supposedly self-evident general premise or from some single authoritative revelation. . . . Then, one day, a new style of cognition emerged, which separated the referential inquiry into nature from the concern with internal social harmony and which, by means which are still only partly understood, succeeded in acquiring astonishingly accurate, general and consensus-securing understanding of the environment." (Gellner 1998, 189)

Gellner stresses that both traditions have their own function, i.e. they have explanatory force in regard to different segments of our life: the tradition of "universalism-atomism" helps to explain, e.g., the development of science and the functioning of the economy; and the tradition of "communal romanticism" can help, e.g., to find a way to harmonise individual, communal, and even natural aspects, both factual and normative. Gellner criticised Wittgenstein because of a special one-sidedness: "He lived out the two options in reverse order, and decreed that the romantic one constituted normality, and the universalistic one was a disease of language. He projected his own rather bizarre development onto the history of thought." (Gellner 1998, 191)

Criticising Wittgenstein, Gellner believes: "The real intellectual problems that modern society faces consist, in very large part, of the relationship between the two styles." (Gellner 1998, 190) In what follows I would like to show that these "two styles" do not exclude each other necessarily as regards their explanatory power; moreover, on the some issues they can complement each other.

In *Prints and Visual Communication* Ivins sketches the development of the printed picture from the 16th century to the emergence of photography in the 19th century. Besides the technical inventions he takes into account, also, their cognitive

consequences. "I propose", writes Ivins, "to look at the evidence from the point of view of that communication of visual information and ideas which, for the last four centuries, has been the primary function of the exactly repeatable pictorial statement." (24) The importance of exact reproduction becomes obvious if we think of verbal communication. Ivins stresses that the institution of verbal communication is built upon the fact of there being exactly repeatable linguistic elements. We think of exact repeatability as something evident in the case of oral or written communication, mediating thoughts verbally, but this is not the case with pictures. As Ivins puts it: "pictures were of little use as definitions or descriptions because they could not be exactly repeated" for a long time. (62) There is no use of definitions and descriptions which can change each time when they are repeated.

"Plato's Ideas and Aristotle's forms, essences, and definitions, are specimens of this transference of reality from the object to the exactly repeatable and therefore seemingly permanent verbal formula. An essence, in fact, is not part of the object but part of the definition. Also, I believe, the well-known notions of substance and attributable qualities can be derived from this operational dependence upon exactly repeatable verbal descriptions and definitions - for the very linear order in which words have to be used results in a syntactical time order analysis of qualities that actually are simultaneous and so intermingled and interrelated that no quality can be removed from one of the bundles of qualities we call objects without changing both it and all the other qualities. " (63)

Accordingly, ancient Greeks, and even "thinking people" of the 19th century, lack the proper technology with which they can take into account, and handle, particularities; so they think in generalities.¹² The interpretation of Platonic ideas from a point of view focusing on communication constitutes an explanatory supplement to the criticism of Plato as formulated by Wittgenstein. We can find here a plausible explanation as regards the need for abstract and systematic definition.

Ivins calls attention to another important aspect of graphic representation when speaking about the "scheme for laying lines" that became "grammars and syntaxes which, while making handmade pictorial statements possible, also greatly restricted and influenced their power of statement." (164)

Let me here introduce some remarks by Michael Polanyi to the effect that in the course of reproducing or describing reality we have to choose between either being precise or being close to the richness of living context. It is impossible to simultaneously grasp precision and the "immense wealth of living shapes", the richness of the whole context.¹³

The very fact that sometimes we have to abstract from the living context implies that we need various, different, cognitive or technical instruments to be able to articulate and communicate ideas.¹⁴ Abstract individualism can be considered as a tradition which fabricates cognitive instruments to be able to handle these capacities, and lack of capacities, and romantic communalism as a tradition representing the other side - being, that is, less precise in concepts and closer to the "immense wealth of living shapes". The idea that the technology of communication has a great importance as regards the cognitive styles of human beings is made plausible by the considerations sketched above, and can be documented by data drawn from the history of culture and philosophy.¹⁵

The point of view focussing on the technology of communication seems to be fruitful both as regards the philosophy of Wittgenstein,¹⁶ as well as casting light on the overlapping elements of the traditions explicated by Gellner. In the light of the connection between, first, the technology of communication, and, second, possibilities as well as limitations in terms of intellectual capacity, and, third, communal-social habits, romantic communalism seems to be somewhat less mystical, and abstract individualism perhaps somewhat more dissociated from real life.

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Endnotes

- 1 Compare Gellner 1998, p. 71
- 2 The same basic conviction of Wittgenstein is of course present in those remarks which deal with the function or limits of philosophy. See *Philosophical Investigations* §123, §124, and §125.
- 3 The regularity and uniformity of new boroughs can be considered as a reference to the tradition of - in Gellner's terminology - abstract universalistic individualism.
- 4 *PI* § 23. See also: "I shall call the whole, consisting of language and actions into which it is woven, the language-game." *PI* § 7.
- 5 On the private language argument from the point of view of the technology of communication see Nyíri 1992, p. 105-113.
- 6 See *PI* § 202.
- 7 "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also ... in judgements." *PI* § 242.
- 8 *PI* § 19.
- 9 TS 225:i-iv as quoted in Nyíri 1983, p. 83.
- 10 "The *Tractatus* had portrayed the human condition, cognitively, morally, semantically - in the spirit of an uncompromising, extreme, virtually comic universalism. Not only science but the mystical as well were described as ineluctably identical in all men. Culture, religion, gender, none of these, or any other specific characterisation, make any difference to anything that really matters in our life. We are all alike, the differences belong to a zone of insignificant. - And just these differences lay at the heart of Wittgenstein's later philosophy." (Gellner 1998, 105)
- 11 Recall Wittgenstein's critique of Plato, in the light of which the latter can in fact be interpreted as an ancestor of that kind of abstract individualism.
- 12 As Ivins writes: "They [thinking people of 18th and 19th century] had not means to think in particularities, which are always irrational, and they had to think in generalities. ... To a very considerable extent they were still in the situation and the frame of mind that had caused the Greeks to think as they did about some of the basic problems in philosophy. Thus just as the ancient Greeks developed the Platonic doctrine of Ideas and Aristotle's essences, so the eighteenth century developed ideas of the Truth of Science and of the Laws of Nature." (91)
- 13 "Higher degrees of formalization make statements of science more precise, its inferences more impersonal and correspondingly more 'reversible'; but every step towards this ideal is achieved by a progressive sacrifice of content. The immense wealth of living shapes governed by the descriptive sciences is narrowed down to bare pointer-readings for the purpose of the exact sciences, and experience vanishes altogether from our direct sight as we pass on to pure mathematics. - There is a corresponding variation in the tacit coefficient of speech. In order to describe experience more fully language must be less precise. But greater imprecision brings more effectively into play the powers of inarticulate judgement required to resolve the ensuing indeterminacy of speech. So it is our personal

participation that governs the richness of concrete experience to which our speech can refer. Only by the aid of this tacit coefficient could we ever say anything at all about experience - a conclusion I have reached already by showing that the process of denotation is itself unformalizable." (Polányi 86-87)

- 14 One of Gellner's earlier studies touches upon this problem in the course of explicating the function of philosophy. See Gellner 1964 p. 68.
- 15 See works of Eisenstein, Havelock, and Ivins.
- 16 Cf. Nyiri 1996/97.