Wittgenstein's Contribution to the Understanding of Predelusional States

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Towards the end of his life, Ludwig Wittgenstein wondered (OC 421) whether he might be shaken if things such as he does not dream of at present were to happen; in other words, Wittgenstein wondered (OC 517) whether it might be possible for something to happen that threw him entirely off the rails. Wittgenstein (Z 393) answered his own questions pointing out that "it is easy to imagine and work out in full detail events which, if they actually came about, would throw us out in all our judgments". In his opinion, if he were sometime to see quite new surroundings from his window instead of the long familiar ones, i.e., if things, humans and animals were to behave as they never did before, then he should say something like `I have gone mad´. However, Wittgenstein added a crucial remark: *"aber das wäre nur ein Ausdruck dafür, daß ich es aufgebe, mich auszukennen"* ("but that would merely be an expression of giving up the attempt to know my way about").

Trying to distinguish what judgments cannot be revised on any evidence, Rush Rhees (Rhees 2003, 118-119) comments that Wittgenstein himself once put it in this way: assuming that door overlooks the street, if I walked through the door and found not street but green pastures, I should say `I must be mad´. Although it is not at all clear where Wittgenstein´s remarks end and where Rhees´s begin, we can read that in this case I should not say `After all I was mistaken´: in fact, I should not try to think what the explanation could be because in such a case I should not know what was meant by an explanation. Up to this point, I agree with Rhees (or with Wittgenstein). But in a sense I do not agree with Rhees when he adds: "`There is no move I could make´ (I should not ever know what to ask). Which is the sense of: `I could not continue the language-game´". I accept it does not mean anything to speak of doubting here, but only inasmuch as we are referring to the event in question; in every sense of the word, I cannot walk around those green pastures searching for an explanation which accounts for that transformation: if I did so, I would be cutting off the branch where that explanation lies. But it is just because I cannot doubt whether street may suddenly turn into green pastures that I may wonder, e.g., why I have encountered or perceived such a thing: so I may bring up explanations making reference to drugs, neurological disorders, sophisticated jokes or experiments, etc. If I convince myself, only to put an example, that I am suffering from the effects of a drug which someone put in my glass of water, I shall not think I have gone mad (and of course, it does not matter if in this case I fall prey to a paranoid way of thinking).

The point is that I was disorientated, but now I know my way about: and as I quoted above (cf. Z 393), Wittgenstein considered `I have gone mad´ as the expression of giving up the attempt to know my way about. In order to clarify how Wittgenstein uses the expression `I have gone mad´, we may go on reading that paragraph: "And the same thing might befall me in mathematics. It might e.g. seem as if I kept on making mistakes in calculating, so that no answer seemed reliable to me". As I see it, this means the individual in question has several options to orient herself, and it is up to her whether and when she gives up the attempt to know her way about; nevertheless, if she gives up such attempt, she will face with a move logically ruled out in the game. `Logically ruled out´ and not `logically impossible´ because, as Rhees (ib, 49-50) remarked, that would change Wittgenstein´s emphasis from noting what is and is not said, to talk of what can and cannot be said.

Regarding those things or events which might throw us entirely off the rails, Brendan A. Maher presented (Maher 1974) an hypothesis on the development of delusional systems: an hypothesis which, in my opinion, might help to explain how Wittgenstein´s remarks can be applied in the research on delusions. According to Maher, many paranoid patients may suffer not from a thinking disorder but from a perceptual disorder: he refers to primary perceptual anomalies, fundamentally biological in nature, although probably fluctuating with current stresses. Some experiences are very important to the patient because they appear invested with unusual significance: this importance may be due, on the one hand, to the inevitable significance of any striking change in patterns of perceptual experience, and on the other hand, to the rather elementary psychological principle that the intensity of a stimulus will influence the perception of its significance. So the patient describes an experience which may be one that a normal observer has never had and hence may appear to be deviant or bizarre, but such experience will drive the patient to provide an explanation. Maher thinks the delusion is the hypothesis designed to explain those unusual perceptual phenomena, but far from being developed through the operation of strange cognitive processes, these explanations (or delusions) are derived by cognitive activity that is essentially indistinguishable from that employed by non-patients, by scientists, and by people generally. I think Maher is right when he adds that strange but pleasurable experiences may lead to the development of religious explanations; however, if these experiences are strange but distressing, they may lead the patient to identify a causative agent: and since no external causative agent is visible to the patient, he is left with the possibility of invisible agencies, i.e., with paranoid thoughts. Even if the explanation is threatening to the patient, a convincing explanation should be accompanied by a strong feeling of personal relief together with the excitement produced by an intellectual insight such as those made in the laboratory or in the study: this feeling of relief increases the probability that delusions will persist, but as in science, it will be very difficult for the clinician to overthrow the delusion when the patient has found a generally satisfactory theory of his own. That is why early detection of developing delusions, and the presentation of counter-evidence, before the "solution-relief" experience has been reached, would seem to be more likely to succeed than later interventions.

As I pointed out above, I accept that absence of doubt belongs to the essence of the language-game (cf. OC 370): in other words, I cannot make the question `How do I know I shall find street and not green pastures behind that door?´. The absurdity of making this question relates to a certain way of acting, but I think such way of acting may be hindered if I carry on finding green pastures behind the door, i.e., if the (anomalous) perceptual experience or the (unlikely) event remains. Someone may explain herself a brief irregularity which is not compatible with her un-

grounded ways of acting (drugs, neurological disorders, sophisticated jokes or experiments, etc, can be brought up): she may look for an explanation because she still has not cut off the branch where her explanation lies, that is, she may think about an unusual anomaly through language-games which account for anomalies. While these language-games which account for anomalies are played, the individual in question is implying she cannot accept that street may suddenly turn into green pastures: so this individual is not justifying why she refuses to admit her discovery because our language-games rule out that possibility. Up to this point, we still share a language-game with her: since all of us are playing the same language-game, there is room for doubting or reasoning. However, as soon as she explains the unlikely event admitting its veracity, she is reacting in a different way: in such case it is our frame of reference itself what has been questioned, so we cannot talk in terms of doubts or reasons with that individual. If we follow Wittgenstein (OC 76), our task would be to give the statements that she would like to make here, but cannot make significantly.

Of course, someone may make surprising scientific discoveries, but inasmuch as we rate these discoveries "scientific", they cannot question science itself; nevertheless, those explanations Maher mentions in his paper question our frame of reference, so they are far from being ordinary explanations. In other words, I do not mean this author is wrong: I mean Wittgenstein places emphasis on a deeper level. In Maher´s opinion, and bearing in mind the intensity of the experiences that they are developed to explain, delusions are rational hypotheses: from this standpoint, delusions should be seen for many paranoid patients as the reactions of normal and sane individuals to abnormal but genuine perceptual experiences, while Wittgenstein (Z 545) sees language-games as an extension of primitive behaviour. Wittgenstein affirms language-games are behaviour. Instinct. Assuming this point, delusional explanations should be seen, above all, as different reactions. As different and ungrounded ways of acting. I think this option is better than Maher´s, at least from a descriptive point of view: clinical experience shows delusions often are too complex to be considered mere rational hypotheses.

By the way, one of the main features of predelusional states is their opaque nature: an opaque nature which makes their description very difficult. Predelusional states are those psychopathological events (disorders regarding emotion, cognition, consciousness, will and behaviour) which precede the appearance of the delusion. Nowadays, our glossaries do not include the diagnosis "predelusional state": this may be due, amongst other things, to the fact that such states often occur before the ill person is hospitalized. Besides, as Germán Berrios and Filiberto Fuentenebro suggest (Berrios and Fuentenebro 1996, 148-149), our language is not suitable to help those ill persons who suffer from this problem to describe their inner state; we should not forget Western culture´s way of "talking about madness" is very poor in certain areas: only to put an example, the language of emotions is less developed than the language of will.

There are at least three kinds of cases which in my opinion, and basing myself on Wittgenstein´s work, might lead to a predelusional state. The first two ones were suggested by Maher: according to this author (Maher 1988, 21-22), theories will be judged delusional by others if (1) the data upon which they are based are available to those who are judging but most observers do not experience puzzlement or sense the significance that the patient does, and (2) the data are not available to those who are judging. The first case may happen even when events do occur as expected, so Wittgenstein seemed to be referring to the second case when he weighed up the possibility that things such as he does not dream of at present were to happen. Regarding these delusional theories based upon data unavailable to the public, Maher added they should develop whenever there is a real impairment in sensory functioning that has not been identified and diagnosed as such to the patient; a defect in the processes that select incoming information for processing; or the experience of disturbance in personal expressive behaviour that has not been given an independent diagnosis.

But since Maher´s cases relate to explanations rather than to ungrounded ways of acting, I would like to place emphasis in the third option. I referred above to the case of the individual who thinks she keeps on making mistakes in calculating, so that no answer seemed reliable to her; as I understand this remark, Wittgenstein (cf. Z 393) is alluding to the loss of the confidence upon which language-games are based: after all, it is only an individual anomaly. This does not mean the person in question will be confident of her answers if she verifies them time and time again; it does not mean either she will be confident if she finds an explanation which justifies the answer (an explanation which justifies, e.g., why two plus two equals four): it just means she has lost the confidence or security indispensable to play that language-game. In other words, as soon as she loses the essential confidence, she is reacting in a different way: the game she is playing is no longer the game she always shared with her linguistic community. However, I think it would be hasty to state this individual is really playing a game. She is not playing a different game, i.e., a game which is played by another linguistic community: as I have just said, she is reacting in a different way. At first sight, her situation may lead to think of a child who cannot begin to take part in language-games because he cannot trust; nevertheless, I am referring to a person who mastered a certain language-game (or several language-games) a long time ago, but she cannot play it (or them) now. I have mentioned the case of the loss of confidence which allows us to calculate in order to show how my remarks relate to Wittgenstein´s work (after all he places great emphasis on philosophy of mathematics), but I think there are examples which seem to lead straight to a predelusional state. Only to put a pair of examples, I would like to invite the reader to think about the case of someone who loses the confidence which allowed him to identify his relatives, friends and companions. Or to think about the case of someone who loses the confidence which allowed him not to doubt his own identity.

In my opinion, it would be very interesting to weigh up the possibility that some delusions are due to the loss of the confidence which allowed us to take part in a language-game: I think this is only one of the points which should lead clinical researchers to bear Ludwig Wittgenstein in mind more often than they did up to now.

Literature

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