Wittgenstein on the Relationship Between Individual and Community

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How does a child learn to speak its native tongue? What makes for the normativity of rules? Can there be a private language? Do I only know from my own case what pain is? These and similar questions make up a large part of Wittgenstein's later work, and his answers all testify to the same basic conviction: that language is a thoroughly social phenomenon and man is an inherently social being. Although Wittgenstein can perhaps not be said to explicitly endorse a social theory of, e.g., mind or meaning, he clearly emphasizes the public instead of the private and the collective instead of the individual in dealing with such issues.

When trying to extrapolate Wittgenstein's – or a Wittgenstein-inspired – view on mind or meaning, one naturally takes this social emphasis as one's starting point. It is arguably the only place to start, but it also leads to some important difficulties - or so it has led me. Sometimes Wittgenstein practically seems to reduce the private to the public and the individual to the communal; does that not effectively prevent him from accounting for the very phenomena he is investigating? For is the ability to, say, understand and follow a rule in the end not an individual capacity? And how to explain the dynamic nature of language without recourse to individuals who break linguistic conventions? It seems that Wittgenstein must maintain *some* notion of individuality, but how is that compatible with the immense importance he apparently attaches to the community?

It is not just for such systematic reasons that one could want to preserve a notion of individuality. An objection that is frequently raised against the (over)emphasizing of the role of community, is that this undermines our concept of personal responsibility. The argument roughly goes that if the self is completely constituted by context, it is unclear whether a person can ultimately be held responsible for his or her actions. Wittgenstein, too, appears to think that the concept of personal responsibility is indispensable. In *Culture and Value* he for instance states that a religious upbringing should never take the form of indoctrination, but must always involve an appeal to conscience. (CV p. 28, 64) He also rejects the theory of predestination as being profoundly irreligious or unethical. (CV p. 81, 86)

To Wittgenstein, then, life is a calling the ethical or religious person should not ignore. Now does this ideal of individual answerability not shed a new light on the priority he assigns to the community elsewhere? Indeed, Wittgenstein's prioritization of community is only irreconcilable with a notion of individuality if both are considered to be diametrically opposed. But could community on the basis of Wittgenstein not be depicted as something to which every individual makes an unequivocal contribution and for which he or she remains responsible? In what follows I hope to contribute to this question of community and individuality or, more precisely, personal responsibility.

Looking for a Wittgensteinian account of community is, however, no easy task. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that Wittgenstein nowhere spells out how he considers the individual and the community to interrelate. I came across only one remark from which a clearer concept of community seems to emerge. In this 1931 reflection on the position of the Jews in European history, Wittgenstein employs the traditional idea of the body politic. Though he does not present the simile as his own, he seems to empathically describe how citizens experience the nation as a body of which they are part, while the Jewish minority is felt to be "a kind of disease". Such a "swelling", Wittgenstein goes on to explain, "can only be taken to be a proper part of the body when the whole feeling for the body is changed." (MS 154 p. 22-23; transl. CB) But he seems rather pessimistic about the possibility of such a transformation ever taking place.

Yet despite this one remark, other parts of Wittgenstein's oeuvre suggest that the idea of the body politic is actually an inappropriate metaphor for thinking about community. An important insight from Wittgenstein's reflections on meaning, first of all, is that the "model of 'object and designation'" (PI § 293) is not the format according to which all of our words function. Wittgenstein is for example highly critical of the temptation to think that 'time' is the name for a special kind of entity or even person (BT p. 522); similarly, one would expect him to call it misguided to assume that 'community' must refer to a particular item or substance. But the idea of the body politic is not only questionable on language-theoretical grounds. It also raises pertinent questions concerning personal responsibility; that appears to be a problematic concept of this picture as responsibility seems transferred to, or at least mediated by, the nation as a whole. But it is precisely this concept of which I have just claimed that Wittgenstein regards it as indispensable.

At first sight, then, Wittgenstein's writings only indicate how *not* to depict the relationship between societies and their 'members', without pointing to a genuine alternative. But instead of concluding that there simply is no legitimate Wittgensteinian concept of community, I propose to develop or extract one by re-reading some of his more 'social' remarks, and speculate on what may be implied or assumed there. Knowing how Wittgenstein would not want to depict community will, rather than bringing my explorations to a halt, be the driving force behind them.

A good starting point are the sections from the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* and *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein puts forward that being in a particular mental state is – to borrow a phrase from his reflections on rule-following – "not something that it would be possible for only *one* man to do" and to be done "only *once*". (PI § 199) Wittgenstein thinks that a person can only be said to pretend, mourn or hope if he or she has been initiated into a certain form of life. A person's being in a particular mental state is therefore not something that is, strictly speaking, limited to that person at that point in time. In the way someone manifests hope or grief he namely reflects the manifestations of hope or grief of those who initiated him.

Hence Wittgenstein states: "Not, what *one* man is doing *now*, but the whole hurly-burly [of the actions of a variety of humans], is the background against which we see an action." (RPPii § 629)

Now what does the observation, that a person's psychological states are what they are only given a larger social context, imply about the concept of community? Is the background Wittgenstein talks about some totality superior to individual human beings; a predetermined whole into which the individual immerses itself without leaving the slightest trace? Elsewhere Wittgenstein describes feelings like grief as "pattern[s]" in the "weave of our life," (PI II i p. 174) which may seem to support such an 'impersonal' reading. On closer inspection, however, these remarks turn out to point in a different direction. Wittgenstein continues that if grief can be taken to be a pattern in the weave of life, one should think of this pattern as being "not always complete" and "varied in a multiplicity of ways." (RPPii § 672) So instead of a monolithic whole, Wittgenstein's weave of life is something open-ended and heterogeneous; the background of an individual's psychological states is a hurly-burly or a "bustle" (RPPii § 625) of human activity. Individuals cannot be said to disappear in the weave of life, for it is composed of nothing more, and nothing less, than the doings of many a human being.

Yet regardless of the dynamics invoked by this 'hustle and bustle' terminology, one could ask whether the picture Wittgenstein paints is nonetheless that of a single human being having to adapt to the others and adopt a common way of life. Is there, to put it differently, not still an ideal of a common identity or collective essence – so unmistakably present in the metaphor of the body politic - at work here as well? When the question is phrased in terms of identity or essence along these lines, one well-known Wittgensteinian concept comes to mind: that of 'family resemblance'. Though Wittgenstein did not intend this concept to represent the relationship between individual and community, it aims to rethink precisely what identity or essence amounts to.

In response to an interlocutor complaining that the *Investigations* nowhere explain what the essence of language is, Wittgenstein famously urges him to consider all the different things we call 'games'. These activities do not have some one thing in common; like the members of a family, each game resembles the other games in one or more respects, but resembles every other game in a different way each time. As a result, the word 'game' is "a concept with blurred edges." (PI § 71) It stands for an open-ended collection of proceedings to which new ones can be added on the basis of characteristics that cannot be given beforehand. But this flexibility is exactly what makes the concept fit for use.

With this in mind, Wittgenstein compares the use we make of concepts like 'game' to the spinning of a thread: "[We] extend our concept […] as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres." (PI § 67) Certainly, Wittgenstein adds, though a concept like 'game' is not "closed by a frontier" prior to all use, "[you] can *draw* one" (PI § 68) at any point. That is, however, always a choice one makes for a specific purpose. It is at any rate not enforced by one essential characteristic that supposedly defines what a game is.

I propose taking the notion of family resemblance as a metaphor, not simply for the flexibility of our concepts,

but for the very way individual and community interrelate. Reading it this way can namely provide an account of community - or at least the outline of one – that could prove to be a worthy alternative to the idea of the body politic. The weave of life that forms the background of a person's mental states is, as I mentioned earlier, composed of a wide range of human activity. It would therefore be more appropriate to speak of the 'weaving' than of the 'weave' of life. But this weaving does not revolve around the production of one ready-made fabric that is supposed to fit all shapes and sizes. It does not, in other words, result in the individual having to conform to a static, prearranged pattern. What the role of the individual human being rather is, can be explained by means of the 'spinning of a thread' analogy.

Just as a thread does not consist of one single fibre but derives its strength from the overlapping of many fibres, community is not a matter of individuals sharing one essential characteristic, but of being both like and unlike each other in many different ways. Partaking of the weaving of life, therefore, is as much a matter of reformation or innovation as it is of conformation. Moreover, just as one can keep on extending a thread by twisting fibre on fibre, it cannot beforehand be stated which individuals with what characteristics belong to a certain community, and which do not. That is to say, one can always draw a boundary line, but that is always a decision one takes for a specific purpose; a decision that cannot be defended by pointing to some unchanging essence and that can thus always be put up for discussion.

My suggestion, then, is that when Wittgenstein appeals to the community, he is not thinking of a mere cluster of isolated beings, nor of the incorporation of persons into some larger whole. Instead, he is thinking of the interweaving of individual human beings' lives by sharing both similarities and differences. The question is whether this suggestion reconciles the apparent tension, identified at the beginning of this paper, between Wittgenstein's ethico-religious ideal of individual accountability, and his prioritization of community. What conclusions, if only provisionally, can be drawn concerning the issue of responsibility from within this framework?

One lesson to be learned concerns the responsibility of the community towards individuals, especially those on the fringes or outside of a community. As there is, on this picture, no ultimate foundation on which a community can be established, the in- and exclusion of individuals, or groups of individuals, is always a choice one must be prepared to defend when objections are raised against it – and objections can always be raised against it. But this form of answerability cannot be seen in isolation from the responsibility that the individual has towards the community, or communities, in which he or she participates. Since an individual's life is interwoven in many ways with many others' lives, anything one does or refrains from doing affects the lives of those others, be they more, less or even remotely akin. One can therefore never withdraw from community, but that does not mean that one thereby loses all responsibility. It should, on the contrary, be understood that one's actions reverberate throughout the weave of life.

Let me conclude by stating that on this reading of Wittgenstein – and let me add that I do not assume it to be beyond improvement or debate - community and personal responsibility are in agreement instead of at odds with each other. To Wittgenstein, indeed, individual and community seem intimately connected instead of diametrically opposed. This suggests that there are limits

as to how social a theory of, e.g., mind or meaning one can develop on the basis of Wittgenstein. But it also suggests that no purely individualistic account can serve as an alternative to an overly social one. To include Wittgenstein in these philosophical discussions means to think beyond this dichotomy.

References

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