

A Naturalistic Method for Therapy not for Science

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Wittgenstein's interest in the connection of language games and forms of life as has often been rightly interpreted as "anthropologism". However, this characterization doesn't help us understand the goal of his philosophical analysis. On the contrary, it seems to make such an understanding harder, for we expect his philosophical work to bring forth anthropological statements. But, as is well known, this is not the case. Wittgenstein rejects all confusion of philosophy with empirical or philosophical anthropology. What then is anthropologism for? I would like to show that Wittgenstein's anthropologism can be put in the proper perspective if it is seen as an attempt to deal with the complex phenomenon of language from a naturalistic viewpoint. For Wittgenstein, our ways of classifying things or languages have become "become [second] nature to us" (BPP II 678) so that the method which makes it possible for us to represent or describe them will itself be naturalistic.

1. Beginning in the thirties, Wittgenstein's anthropological turn takes two distinct directions: on the one hand, the analysis of language is given an anthropological twist; on the other hand, Wittgenstein directly engages with anthropology in the narrow (and conventional) sense in his reflections on Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Here I will not be dealing with these latter thoughts, as I believe that they depend on Wittgenstein's adoption of an anthropological standpoint in philosophy. I would like to show that there is a deep connection between such a standpoint and the therapeutic purpose of Wittgenstein's philosophical activity.

According to Dale Jacquette, Wittgenstein's anthropologism consists in (1) the discovery of a plurality of different kinds of words and propositions, as opposed to the *Tractatus*' semantic reductionism; (2) frequent references to the organic, historical and cultural nature of language as a developing body of linguistic practices or language games; (3) the crucial role of the pragmatic concept of a language game as an activity internal to a *form of life* (Jacquette 1999: 168; see 1998). Anthropologism carries out the program outlined in the first few pages of *Blue Book*, bringing the question „What is meaning?“ back to earth. We could also say that it shapes the enterprise that is outlined in *Philosophical Investigations*, 107, going back "to the rough ground", regaining the "friction" that was lost in the attempted inquiry into "the crystalline purity of logic".

2. However, characterizing Wittgenstein's philosophy in anthropological terms does not make it easier to understand it: on the contrary, it seems to complicate such an understanding. The nature of philosophical inquiry is not made any clearer, for alongside the adoption of an anthropological standpoint we find the explicit rejection of all identification of philosophy with anthropology, and a definite and declared lack of interest in everything that professional anthropologists are usually interested in. 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*. (CV 45e)

Because of the frequent reference to the intertwining of language games and forms of life, the reader is led to the false expectation that sooner or later truths will be

stated, either empirical or philosophical, concerning the relation of language and forms of life. In this respect, however, he is bound to be disappointed: Wittgenstein clearly declares that the kind of philosophy he is up to does not set itself the task of stating truths, be they empirical or philosophical (i.e., metaphysical). Thus, there are interpreters¹ who take issue with Wittgenstein for not fully understanding the value of his own references to the natural and cultural features that go together with the use of language, i.e., the features that are supposed to define the anthropological standpoint.

3. Wittgenstein's interest in the relation of language and forms of life is regarded (1) either as an attempt at a pragmatic or praxeological grounding of language. As Jacquette points out, what is outstanding in the later Wittgenstein's treatment of language and language games is his aiming at an extra-semantic – pragmatic or praxeological – foundation of language use within a form of life; or (2) as an exploration of the transcendental conditions for the possibility of language, thought and rationality (as with such transcendentalist interpreters as Williams 1974 and Lear 1986). Now, I do not wish to rule out that either reading of the anthropological standpoint may be possible or philosophically fruitful. However, neither interpretation can account for Wittgenstein's explicit claims concerning the nature of philosophy, that it does not generate discoveries or produce explanations (PI 126), be they causal, historical, or metaphysical. That philosophical truths should be stated does not agree with philosophy's therapeutic point, i.e., with the suggestion that philosophical problems should disappear thanks to the achievement of a clearer view of language (PI 133).

4. By contrast, the therapeutic point of Wittgenstein's philosophy is accounted for in John McDowell's "quietist" interpretation of anthropologism (McDowell 1992). For McDowell, Wittgenstein does not mean to take programmatic steps toward some style of positive philosophy just because he mentions customs or forms of life. Wittgenstein's remark "What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*" (PI II p.226) is not to be interpreted as a "philosophical response ... to supposedly good questions about the possibility of meaning and understanding, or intentionality generally"; instead, "his point is to remind us that the natural phenomenon that is normal human life is itself already shaped by meaning and understanding" (McDowell 1992: 50-51).

However, if Wittgenstein had wanted to say that there is a natural phenomenon, normal human life, which is imbued with meaning and understanding, one, wonders why he did not say so in so many words. Again, McDowell's "quietist" interpretation has Wittgenstein say either too little or too much. Too much, if the very general notion of "normal human life" (McDowell) is unqualifiedly assumed as the locus where therapeutic efforts converge or as an unproblematic notion on which we all agree. For if the notion's features and range of application are not specified, how could it fail to be just another metaphysical notion (some kind of foundation or transcendental limit)?

¹ As a rule, this criticism is raised by naturalistic interpreters such as Conway 1989, Pears 1995.

On the other hand, Wittgenstein is made to say too little if normal human life is assumed to be an empirical phenomenon that could be described from some standpoint; once more, we are unable to explain why Wittgenstein did not devote himself to such a description.

5. False expectations and illegitimate interpretations can both be avoided if we pay full attention to Wittgenstein's explicitly paradoxical presentation of his anthropologism. I have in mind the text in the *Investigations* where Wittgenstein declares, on the one hand, that he is interested in "the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature", while insisting that, on the other hand, his interest "does not fall back upon these possible causes of the formation of concepts", as "we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history" (PI II xii, p.230).²

If anthropologism is not meant to provide a scientific or philosophical foundation for language uses, nor meant to ground the identification of philosophy with anthropology, why does Wittgenstein adopt it? My view is that anthropologism is an essential ingredient of the kind of methodological naturalism that Wittgenstein conceived and endorsed in the post-*Tractatus* years. Dealing with philosophical problems from an anthropological standpoint amounts to adopting a naturalistic method in the investigation of the logic of language – a method that could be applied independently of any *theory* of language. For Wittgenstein, this is the solution to the problem of the legitimacy of philosophical inquiry, which, even after *Tractatus*, he is still conceiving of as an investigation of what is most fundamental, i.e., the logic of language. 'Fundamental' here is to be understood as not grounded upon anything else, as logic is, at any time, already active in common everyday language.

By 'naturalistic method' I mean the method of language games, from which analysis proceeds with everyday language (where logic is already effective), isolating parts of it – certain characteristic uses – and comparing them with other parts of the same everyday language, with other uses which are liable to generate conceptual misunderstandings. We know that Wittgenstein did not conceive of language games as preparatory studies to improve, refine or reform the language we have but only as terms of comparison, allowing us to highlight similarities and differences among our concepts in order to achieve a clear, perspicuous view (PI 130).

There are at least three reasons why I call this method 'naturalistic'. First of all, to start with everyday language (or with parts of it, the language games) is to remain on the "rough ground" of use; it is to look at language as "part of the human organism and ... no less complicated than it", as Wittgenstein had already suggested we should do in *Tractatus* 4.002. Secondly, I call the method 'naturalistic' on account of the *Preface* to the *Investigations* where Wittgenstein points out that what looked essential to him in composing his book was that "the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural order and without breaks" (PI, p.vii). Is Wittgenstein suggesting that nature dictated to his thinking the correct path to follow in philosophical inquiry? What could that mean? The answer can be found in *Zettel* 355³,

where a distinction is made between two different uses of 'natural': in one use it alludes to facts of nature (such as facts about the psychophysical constitution of human beings), while in another use it refers to what comes natural to us after having been trained to follow a rule. In the latter use the word is synonymous with 'usual', 'obvious', 'common'. Adopting the method of language games amounts to embracing a natural method for the description of the phenomenon of language, for language games are constituted by the rules we got used to follow, so that they have become "nature" to us:

"We're used to a particular classification of things. With language, or languages, it has become [second] nature to us". (RPP II 678)

"These are the fixed rails along which all our thinking runs, and so our judgement and action goes according to them too" (RPP II 679). [Z 375].

That the method of philosophy is naturalistic is not inconsistent with its employing acquired forms of linguistic behavior as tools for its comparative practice, for they have become "nature" for us. A philosopher who embraces such a method is thus not bound to be interested in re-establishing something that would be natural in the sense of belonging to physical or biological nature as distinct from the realm of the artificial, or culture. In fact, Wittgenstein has no use for this distinction. In adopting the method, the philosopher is just equipping himself with tools (the language games) and a standpoint (the anthropological standpoint) from which description is to be carried out.

Thirdly, I call the method 'naturalistic' for it is derived from a method that was conceived and applied in biology since the 18th century in the study of the forms and transformations of living beings. It is a comparative method, focussing on the forms and functions of the parts of animals and plants; it originated from the discipline called 'morphology', a necessary condition for the development of Darwinian evolutionary theory (Richards 2002: 522). As is well known, Wittgenstein was well acquainted with the works of one of the creators of the naturalistic or morphological method, J. W. Goethe. Here there is no room to go into the many significant connections between Wittgenstein's thought and Goethe's. Wittgenstein's writings testify to his uninterrupted intellectual exchange with and reflection upon Goethe's method (Schulte 1990, Andronico 1999, McGuinness 2002).

6. Going back to anthropologism, we now understand why it did not lead to anthropological statements asserting anthropological truths. On the other hand, we may wonder whether anthropologism was *merely* functional to the adoption of Wittgenstein's methodological naturalism. The answer must be negative. Although Wittgenstein's focus on the anthropological dimension of language is no end in itself (so that it does not lead to the statement of anthropological truths), philosophical inquiry based upon the method of language games determines in its practitioners effects that are close to those of empirical investigations in anthropology, where the practice of intercultural comparison and contrast allow us to single out and describe the rules that others have given themselves as well as those that we have adopted and follow. An example could be Clifford Geertz's work: his style of doing anthropological research leads to the "acknowledgement of limits" (Geertz 2000: 137), i.e., to the "recognition of the fact that we are all [...] «positioned (or situated) observers»", who renounce "the authority that comes from

² A closely similar remark can be read in the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* I, 46: "We are not pursuing a natural science; our aim is not to predict anything".

³ "If we teach a human being such-and-such a technique by means of examples, - that he then proceeds like *this* and not like *that* in a particular new case, or that in this case he gets stuck, and thus that this and not that is the 'natural' continuation for him: this of itself is an extremely important fact of nature" (Z 355).

«views from nowhere»" (Geertz 2000: 137). The effect of Wittgenstein's naturalistic method is similar; in his own words, it leads us to recognize the workings of our language in spite of an urge to misunderstand them (PI 109), i.e., in spite of an urge to hypostasize them by attributing them an authority emanating from nowhere.

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