Language Games and Serious Matters: Cultural Pluralism, Relativism and Rituals in the Media

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Supporters of cultural pluralism like to rely on Wittgenstein's claims with regard to the plurality and the variety of "language games". They pretend, e.g., (Lyotard, 1979) to find there support for their claim that different cultures or "communities of meaning", are "incommensurable" and therefore no "dominant group" should impose its "meta-narratives" on other groups. But Wittgenstein's claims are not about cultural plurality. He referred mainly to the plurality *within* the culture that he shared with his addressees: the variety of different "games" in which the individual, in different context, takes part.

In (Wttgenstein, 1958) he asks us, indeed, to imagine all sorts of tribes with "funny" languages-games, but the point of those examples is not to suggest that such "games" are beyond *any* criticism, but to illustrate the *picture* of plurality of games: An act that counts as a move in one of them is not a move in another; a similar move that can be taken in two different games counts as a legitimate in one but not in the other; a move that is legitimate in both of them may be justifiable in one but not in the other, etc. Chess and checkers exemplify such relations. They are different games, different rules of *action* and therefore different "forms of *life*" (rather than *abstract meanings*), but they do not represent different *cultures*. There can be more than one culture in which one can "play" sometimes Euclidian and sometimes non-Euclidean geometrics, but no culture *consists in* "playing" either. There is more than one culture were both chess and checkers can be played; there is no culture that *consists in* playing either. And, of course, no individual, not even the craziest chess fan, is always playing – talking, thinking – chess.

Wittgenstein's tribes are as hypothetical than the that has a name for undetached rabbit parts but not for a rabbit (Quine, 1960). When the example of that tribe (which might fit the claims in (Whorf, 1956) about the connection between languages and worldviews) is detached from its context, it might seem to express a cultural pluralist and relativist position. Quine had brought it, however, in connection to the discussion in (Wittgenstein, 1958, II.xi, pp. 165-166) of the rabbit-duck picture, a classical example for an ambiguous figure that causes instability of perspective, so that *every* observer acquainted with those patterns sees it *sometimes* as a rabbit and s*ometimes* as a duck. Wittgenstein uses it in order to argue that words are not names of "private" perceptions: We cannot know to which of the possibilities the speaker of a foreign language might refer when we show him the picture and ask him whether what he sees in the picture is what he means by the word. Quine adds the apparently "savage" perspective in order to argue that translation is under-determined even when there is no problem of a pattern ambiguity. He could have used another perspective, e.g., seeing it as a piece of paper, but his (anti Whorfian) point is that unless there are practical implications to the difference between seeing a rabbit as a whole or as undetached parts, the translator's decision depends on his theory and not on empirical evidence. But even if those examples were relevant to the cultural *relativist*'s claim they would not serve his *cause*, for both refer to cultures with apparently limited horizon, whose members, unlike us, do not see the scientific advantage of the whole rabbit perception, cannot count or calculate beyond 6, etc. They might reinforce the prejudice that *they* play only football, and even if *we* could succeed in teaching *them* to play a simple version of checkers, chess will always be beyond *their* capacities. The "savage" perspective mentioned by Quine might, however, have practical implications in our own culture (e.g., for a butcher); and, as we shall see, Wittgenstein does not assume that observers whose language is totally alien to us are *incapable* of "our" perspective shifts.

The analyses of simple words like '*same*' or '*see'* (Wittgenstein, 1958) are more instructive: They show that Wittgenstein was concerned with different "language games" that are "played" *within* the culture that he shared with his audience. As the picture's example is supposed to show, the question whether the perception that is described by the English speakers "the color white" is the same *perception* as that of the Eskimos is a *nonsensical* question. He is convinced, however, that what counts as "the same" in the "language game" of the meteorologists (in the description of the weather conditions), in that of the microbiologists (in their description of microscopic sights), in that of logicians (in their discussion of identity or synonymy) and in that of art critics (when they are comparing films) is not precisely the same "same". He thinks that we, moreover, see that 'seeing' in the "language games" of physicists and optometrists, is not used by the same rules in the description of mystical illuminations or in the present "language game", where we use the verb 'see' in order to say that the difference is clear. It is clear in the English (or Eskimo) version, although Wittgenstein wrote German that is not always translatable to other languages word by word.

Wittgenstein, like some of his contemporary, criticized atomistic empiricism, linguistic nominalism, and the Lockean intolerance for "unnatural associations of ideas" and "idle talks". That camp included Gestalt psychologists and non-inductivist philosophers of science. It included also linguists (who were interested in the multiplicity of non-descriptive "functions" and "games" of language), students of cultural phenomena (who sought to differentiate between seeing events as social and historical and seeing them as physical, or between seeing something as a ritual object or a work of art and not, say, as a commodity or as a natural object) and "life-philosophers" (like the later Husserl and his follower Schütz). All of whom insisted that we live in "multiple realities" or "worlds", those of work, fiction, day-dreaming, religion, jokes and sometimes also the hypothetical, abstract and "ideal" realms of science and mathematics. All of them were convinced that the classical conceptions of logicians, mathematicians, physicists and the positivistic perspective of the engineer should not dominate our approach to the other domains.

Such a position implies, of course, a criticism of the "colonialist's" positivistic approach to foreign cultures, which judges them according to the "irrational" otherness that it attributes to their myths, cults etc., but ignores aspects of their life in which they do not differ from "us". Wittgenstein would, accordingly, accept the approach of (Lévi-Strauss, 1962), rather than that of (Winch, 1958): For the

former the "otherness" of the other is often only apparent while the latter insists that the "otherness" is real and comprehensive. The former maintains that the so-called "primitives" share, in their own styles and environmental context, the "mature" Western attitudes – the practical, the technical, the critical and the ironic, beside the "infantile", "dream-like", "mythical" and "magical" attitudes, and the West takes part - in its own myths, totems, taboos and rites - in "their savage thinking". He maintains that one cannot understand properly their – and our – tradition as well as everyday communication unless we realize that all functions of language - the "logical" referential and the meta-linguistic as well as the "psychological" emotional and connative, the "social" phatic and the "spiritual" poetic (cf. (Jakobson, 1968)) are present in their myths and rites - and our theories and ceremonies – and in their everyday communication. Winch puts the stress on the need to interpret the other culture *as a whole*, and follows (Collingwood, 1946) rather than Wittgenstein. He insists, like (Geertz, 1973) that the interpreter should adopt the role of a participant, and thereby misses the distinction (Wittgenstein, 1958) between the child's acquisition of (first) language and translation from another language, where one observes the *speaker's* "following of a rule". Winch assumes, moreover, that the other culture *as a whole* could be studied from that perspective as a coherent *"form of life"*, which seems to fit the views of (Lyotard, 1979) or (Foucault, 1966) but it ignores Wittgenstein's distinction between a "language game" as a "form of life" and the "mythology" that is the "riverbed" (Wittgenstein, 1995, §§96/99) of a variety of "meanings" that are constituted by the various "language-games" that are "played" in a given culture, and, despite possible incoherence, are somehow connected in a way that allows the "inter-games" shifts of jokes and irony (cf. (Wittgenstein, 1958. §23). Had Wittgenstein lived today, he would probably oppose the current pretensions of some researchers and critics that pretend to have discovered the (coherent) "codes" that are specific to entire cultures or peoples, and their claim to know their "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1980), and the motives that allegedly stand behind it

We should, in particular, distinguish between his notion of "mythology" and Foucault "regime of truth" that is specific to a given society. The presuppositions, attitudes and practices that constitute the "riverbed", or "mythology", have no truth value; they are "pictures". While the metaphor of a "background' can mislead us to see cultures as standing separately, each before its wall, the metaphor of a "riverbed" allows them to have common sources, to cross or run alongside each other, to converge as well as diverge. Wittgenstein does not speak of a "dominant group" that seeks to impose its "regime of truth" on other groups, but of a common net of connected meanings in terms of which people may have different, and sometimes opposing "language games" and attitudes. His approach is therefore compatible with the possibility that in some respects some people, conservatives as well as modern ones, whose Jewish, Moslem or Christian "riverbeds" have common sources and are constantly in some or other kind of interaction, are closer to each other than to members of their respective groups. (In fact, he himself a Catholic son of converted parents that was considered as a Jew by the Nazis, was quite perplexed about his own identity.) In a dialogue cited by (Phillips, 1986, p. 30) he speaks of a ritual of the ancient Hebrews and says: "*The scapegoat on which sins are laid and which goes out into the wilderness with them, is a false picture"*, and thereby makes an allusion to a "picture" that has a central place in Christianity. While Phillips explains that the Hebrew "picture" (taken literarily) is nonsensical while the Christian picture (taken figuratively) speaks of a familiar phenomenon and therefore makes sense as a metaphor, Wittgenstein himself does not continue to say "like all the false pictures of the Hebrews", but says, rather ironically: "*and like all the false* - explained latter as misleading - *pictures of philosophy*" . He, unlike Phillips, does not say that Christian "mythology" *is* basically different and makes more sense than the Hebrew one, for both can be seen either *as* a nonsensical method of transference of sins and responsibility and both can be seen *as* a symbolic rejection of sins. He, on a meta-level, sees both *as* "pictures" that are "like …pictures of philosophy". He concludes by relating to a non-misleading philosophy: "*Philosophy might be said to purify thought from a misleading mythology*". Cultural relativism is a "misleading mythology" and not a purifying philosophy.

The cultural relativist sticks to the level of the "games" and denies the possibility of "meta-games" were "mythologies" are judged to be "misleading". He insists that one cannot judge a move in checkers by the rules of chess. But this truism is relevant only in a "language game" that permits – and according to Wittgenstein any permission of that sort is a matter of an underlying "mythology" - only intra-game judgments. Wittgenstein, who judges "mythologies", does not limit himself to such "games". Though he does not mention "meta-games" (which in his context of discourse could hint at a superiority of abstract logical meta-languages over the "ordinary" ones) he does not hesitate to point to the superiority of "ordinary" discourses over the "grammatical jokes" of philosophers (Wittgenstein, 1958, §111). The linkage between "jokes" and "misleading" is perhaps inspired by the linguistic analysis of witty puns and jokes, dreams and neuroses in (Freud, 1900, & 1905), which shows "illogical" *shifting back and forth between a variety of "language-games"* with the ironic pretension (or self-deception) to "play" one and the same "game". Lévi-Strauss (1962) shows how such a "metaphoric" or "metonymic" shifts (which he calls "savage" but not "illogical") work in myths and rituals, and hint, like Freud's jokes, at denied conflicts and contradictions that are apparently resolved. Myths, like jokes, are not misleading *as long as the audience is aware of their "poetic" character*, and does not take them as statements of facts. The "grammatical jokes" of philosophers are "jokes" because they make wild shifting between "language-games" but pretend to be statements of facts. They are therefore "misleading mythologies", and the role of (purifying) philosophy is to warn against the misleading and prevent it. Such "purification" is a "meta-game" that compares "language-games" and judges them, although the playing of the misleading philosopher and his ironic, poetic, joking, myth-telling and neurotic accomplices (including Wittgenstein himself in all those roles) is perhaps too anarchic and idiosyncratic to be considered as *rule-governed* social "language game". It is, moreover, a "meta-game" that allows challenging the player, asking why he chooses to play it and, as Wittgenstein says with regard to a conversation with an imaginary king from an imaginary (inferior) culture: he "would be brought to look at the world in a different way" (Wittgenstein, 1995, §92)

The same approach can be applied to the "grammatical grotesques" and audio-visual "burlesques" that today's mass-media, internet blogs and mass-production of dissertations and publications enable and encourage: advertisement, political propaganda, and other statements that are apparently statements of facts, but the "rules of their game" are rather the rules of a ritual. Rituals, like myths, jokes and neuroses, do not respect any boundaries, and shift "illogically" between "language-games". with disrespect for scientific or commonsensical criteria for

causation, temporal and special order, object or subject identity etc. They are tolerant to irrelevance and incoherence, and contradictions play in them a major role. Rituals create, moreover, "sacred objects" with contrary poles and contradictory qualities, that are supposed to have symbolic or magic powers and effects, such as the ability to be malevolent even in their benevolence, knowing in their ignorance, or *vice versa*, and with capacities of transference of evil or salvation, responsibility or guilt, repentance or stubbornness to others. Whether their "unification of oppositions" by such shifting and absurdities helps the managements of denied personal or social conflicts or whether it does not, Wittgenstein, as cited above, insists that picking a "*scapegoat on which sins are laid"* in order to send it with them "*into the wilderness*" is a "false picture".

The classical scapegoat is not the Se'ir le-Azazel of the ancient Hebrews, but the Jew in the religious or racist anti-Semite "mythology". Wittgenstein's enlarged approach is therefore the answer to the claim of (Feyerabend, 1975), according to which humanitarianism and anti-Semitism are incommensurable coherent language-games, and both are beyond any external criticism: They are different "games" on the background of different "mythologies", but they *are* comparable and the humanitarian can criticize the anti-Semite in a "meta-game" that flows in a "riverbed" that is common to both. Anti-Semitism as a form of racism is only one version of an "essentialist" marking of a group as the "goats" from which one can pick arbitrary the "scapegoats". In other versions the "goats" are nations, religions, classes, genders, professions etc. The "sacred object" may, alternatively, be a "shepherd", usually a member of an ideological group that encourages the "sheep" to yell at the "wolves" for past wrong (as it is done nowadays, e.g., in some of the "post-colonialist" rituals), or a group of reconciliatory "lambs", whose ritual consists in bringing opposing groups each to listen to the "narrative" of the other and teach both to co-exist in the alleged "incommensurability". According to Wittgenstein's approach they are all "mythologies" that are neither ":true" nor "false", but some are nevertheless more "misleading" than the others because of their pretension to deal with facts while they express and foster attitudes. As the metaphor of the king shows, Wittgenstein would prefer to substitute the rituals with conversations about "mythologies" and one's reasons to adopt or reject them, in which the participants will be brought to *reconsider* their "narratives" and "*look at the world in a different way.*"

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