

How do Moral Principles Figure in Moral Judgement? A Wittgensteinian Contribution to the Particularism Debate

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1. Introduction: What is moral deliberation?

One of the key debates in current moral philosophy focuses on the role of moral principles in moral deliberation. Among the many opinions on the table, we find the theses of Universal Weak Particularism (UWP) and Universal Weak Generalism (UWG), which can be formulated as follows:

(UWP) Generally, the application of moral principles is *not sufficient* for correct moral judgement.

(UWG) Generally, the application of moral principles is *necessary* for correct moral judgement.

Obviously, these theses are mutually consistent. Moreover, both are conclusions of strong arguments: (UWP) is inductively supported by the fact that, so far, for every candidate of a suitably general and non-trivial moral principle, it has been possible to devise a scenario in which the principle's strict application would strike us as simply wrong. This is true for both *all out* and *pro tanto* principles (see Dancy 2004). (UWG) is supported by the fact that our aim of consistency in ethical learning, debate and judgement is not just a piece of ideology, but an actually attainable goal. Consistency between particular moral judgements, however, is nothing but the existence of principled relations among them. If these arguments are successful, we have good reason to accept both (UWP) and (UWG).

However, the combination of (UWP) and (UWG) does not seem to appeal to many commentators. Their reservation is, I think, due to the thought that we lack a theory of moral deliberation which implies both theses at once. What *are* moral principles, they ask, if moral judgement cannot be *reduced* to their application, and yet *depends* on the latter? In this paper, I want to argue that the work of the later (and latest) Ludwig Wittgenstein gives rise to an interesting and plausible answer to this question. It revolves around the ideas that moral principles can be interpreted as grammatical propositions, and that moral problems can be interpreted as instances of grammatical inconsistency and, hence, as occasions for grammatical revision. Moral judgement, on this view, is a matter of following grammar, but it is also a matter of adequately revising it in the face of grammatical tension.

2. Grammatical statements, grammatical tension and grammatical evolution in Wittgenstein's work

We are surely warranted to take seriously Wittgenstein's insistence that his project is one of philosophical *therapy*, aiming to free us from our urge to philosophise by unmasking our seemingly deep metaphysical ideas as mere grammatical confusions. However, in order to be able to read Wittgenstein in this way, we cannot help but ascribe to him a certain number of theoretical commitments regarding the workings of language. In this section, I want to review, as quickly as possible, key elements of Wittgenstein's mature conception of language, and to show that they comprise ideas of *grammatical tension* and *grammatical evolution*.

Wittgenstein's return to philosophy in 1929 marks a radicalisation of the view that natural language is best analysed as a practical calculus embedded in and continuous with non-linguistic practice. While the *Tractatus* still entertained the idea that some (namely the "atomic") propositions stand in isomorphic relations with aspects of the world, the later Wittgenstein thinks of the calculus of language as fully autonomous. All utterances are now conceived as practical manoeuvres, connected via rules with other such manoeuvres as well as with non-linguistic phenomena and doings in their vicinity. On this view, all talk of "meaning" or "content" is just a way of discussing the role which an expression plays within the practical calculus of language.

This idea poses an obvious threat to the distinction between analytic and empirical content. Traditionally, the meaning of a proposition was thought to be a two-component object. There was the empirical component on the one hand, and the analytical (logical, conceptual) component on the other. With the idea that the meaning of an expression is exhausted by the logical or, as Wittgenstein has it: *internal* (TLP 4.125ff., 5.131, 5.2ff.) role within the calculus, it becomes an open question how empirical content is at all possible, or what it would amount to.

Moreover, in attacking the traditional analytic-empirical distinction, Wittgenstein's move threatens our everyday practice of distinguishing between *misunderstanding* and *disagreement*. If communication, as Wittgenstein writes, depends on "agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements" (PI 242), then it seems that every time speakers diverge in their propositional judgements, they turn out to play different games and thus *talk past each other*. Can *this* be true?

While many thinkers have taken this threat as a pure and simple *reductio ad absurdum*, Wittgenstein holds fast to his interpretation of language as a practical calculus and looks, in his later writings, for a pragmatic way to re-erect the traditional distinctions in question. Wittgenstein's eventual solution centres around the idea that if philosophers took into account ordinary speaker's actual *employment* of the calculus of language, they would soon notice that speakers do not just *draw* on its rules, but constantly *develop* them further. They are always, he thinks, in the business of coining *new* linguistic manoeuvres, such as new propositions. Of course, it has long been known that our language is compositional. i.e. that it comprises sub-propositional components (such as *concepts*) which can be regrouped to form new, yet immediately understandable, sentences (and other utterances). But since concept rules are, on a calculus account of language, bound up with proposition rules, this does not show how empirical content or the possibility of proper disagreement comes into the picture. Wittgenstein's idea, now, is that we can use propositions to *alter* the rules governing concepts – i.e. their meanings – and *thus* convey empirical content.

To give a very simple example: although the meaning of a concept like “dog” is fully determined by true propositions like “Every dog is a mammal”, “Dogs don’t lay eggs” (and so on), we *can*, in a novel proposition, bring a new predicate to bear on “dog”. If we do this, we propose to (slightly) alter the concept rules (meanings) of both “dog” and the new predicate. *This way, we pass on new information about both.* Since in a way, only “new” propositions are interesting, it makes sense to say that every interesting proposition brings with it new rules for the use of concepts. However, Wittgenstein makes clear that there is also a use for “old” propositions. “Old” propositions clarify how already-established concepts are used and thus serve as interpretation guidelines for new propositions drawing on these concepts. “Every dog is a mammal” is a good example of this. To put the distinction in Wittgenstein’s own words: a generally accepted proposition “is removed from the traffic. It is so to speak shunted onto an unused siding. / Now it gives our way of looking at things, and our researches, their form.” (OC 210f., see also 96f.)

It is *here* that the mature Wittgenstein re-introduces the distinction between substantive (empirical) content and logical (conceptual) rules, the latter now being called *grammar*. Grammar is comprised of rules of concept use as established in “old” (or “hardened”, OC 96) sentences, while substantive content resides in the proposed rules of concept use displayed in “new” (or “fluid”, OC 96) sentences. I have attached quotes to the terms “new” and “old”, because these terms are relative to particular conversations. A proposition can be long accepted (“hard”) in some contexts, but strikingly novel (“fluid”) in others. Wittgenstein, keenly aware of this fact, confirms that

Sentences are often used on the borderline between logic and the empirical, so that their meaning changes back and forth and they count now as expressions of norms, now as expressions of experience. (For it is certainly not an accompanying mental phenomenon ... but the use, which distinguishes the logical proposition from the empirical one.) (RC I:32, see also III:19, OC 309)

Here, then, we see Wittgenstein’s way of re-erecting the analytical-empirical distinction within a practical calculus account of language. From here, of course, it is not difficult also to re-erect the distinction between misunderstanding and disagreement: if two speakers diverge with respect to a proposition which we (the interpreters) take to be a piece of grammar, we call their divergence a misunderstanding. If the proposition in question is interpreted (by us) as a proposal of new concept rules, we call their divergence a disagreement.

Importantly, the sketched conception of language is dynamic. It holds that once a proposition is accepted (within a particular conversation), every re-iteration will be a grammatical utterance. The account thus includes a commitment to the *evolution* of language. I now want to stress that according to Wittgenstein, language does not always evolve smoothly. There are situations in which a new empirical proposition involves a *violation* of a piece of grammar – without thereby being rendered senseless. To see what I have in mind, consider again the idea that communication rests on “agreement in judgements” (PI 242). Wittgenstein’s clearest example of this is colour discourse (see RC I:66, III:42, III:86ff., III:94, III:127). Clearly, when someone claims to have seen a patch of “bluish orange” (RC III:94), we would conclude that either the speaker is crazy, or that her way of speaking is in need of translation into *our* vocabulary (perhaps colour

vocabulary, but perhaps she does not speak about colour at all). “There is, after all,” says Wittgenstein, “no commonly accepted criterion for what is a colour, unless it is one of our colours.” (RC III:42) And yet, Wittgenstein insists (in many passages), there *are* possible cases in which we *would* allow for *different* colours.

It is quite possible that, under certain circumstances, we would say that people know colours that we don’t know, but we are not forced to say this... (RC III:127)

Wittgenstein goes on to supply two analogies.

This is like the case in which we speak of infra-red ‘light’; there is a good reason for doing it, but we can also call it a misuse. And something similar is true with my concept ‘having a pain in someone else’s body’. (RC III:127)

From this last passage, we can glean an implicit theory of grammatical evolution through grammatical tension. To see this, take the infra-red case. We can easily imagine two opposing factions who argue as follows: “Light makes objects visible. Infra-red does not make objects visible. Therefore it is not light.” versus “Light is the kind of radiation which helps us navigate and is processed by the eyes. This is the case with infra-red (if we use night-sight devices). Therefore, this radiation comes under the concept of light.” The important point to notice is that we have, here, two premises which are clearly taken to reflect the grammar of shared language, yet which, along with uncontroversial minor premises, come into conflict with one another in the face of the invention of infra-red radiation. If this description is correct, then we have an example of a situation in which two sets of grammatical norms turn out to be such that following them beyond a certain point leads to conflict. This conflict demands a grammatical revision *in the form of a new empirical judgement*. Since this amounts to a change of the game of language, every proposition uttered or written before the revision must be carefully tested and, if necessary, translated into the new language.

3. Moral principles as grammatical norms, moral problems as grammatical tension

I concede that this short reconstruction of Wittgenstein’s mature conception of grammar deserves both a stronger exegetical appraisal and much more discussion of its details. In this paper, however, rather than paying these debts, I want to show that its core idea is capable of providing just the account of moral deliberation we need to counter the reservation discussed above. If we interpret moral principles as grammatical rules and moral problems as grammatical tensions along the lines of Wittgenstein’s infra-red example, we see how it can be the case that moral judgement relies both on moral principles *and* on the capacity to make sensible revisions in the face of practical conflict, making both (UWP) and (UWG) true. The idea is that moral judgements follow norms of grammar just as closely as in colour discourse, only that in moral discourse, they are less settled and less harmonic.

To see that this interpretation is not just a wild stipulation, consider that grammatical norms do not usually come as traditionally analytic propositions, like “A bachelor is unmarried” or (to take a moral example) “Justice is to give to each person her due”. On the contrary, every proposition can serve, once established and accepted as true, as a reminder of a piece of grammar. If this is true for all propositions, it is clearly true for the following remarks:

“A promise must be kept”, “A promise must be kept, unless this would involve the breach of a right”, “If a proposition constitutes a promise, that counts in favour of doing the act to which it refers.” These, of course, are paradigm examples of moral principles.

In the face of the particularist insistence that we can always devise scenarios in which following a principle like these turns out to be morally objectionable, we can now lean back. If, for example, the mentioned promise turns out to have been given under torture, we can *agree* that on this condition, the fact that some utterance constitutes a promise counts *against* committing the act in question, making even the weakest of the three principles (the *pro tanto* principle) false. The important point to notice, however, is that we can take this situation as one of *grammatical tension* analogous to the case in which the old grammar surrounding the concept “light” was confronted with the new realities of infra-red. In other words, we can see in the case an occasion for a controlled revision of the grammar surrounding the concept “promise”, i.e. a partial revision of its very meaning and thus of our language game. On this view, both (UWG) and (UWP) come out true. Every judgement involves following norms; but some judgements necessarily involve re-developing them pragmatically. I want to submit to your consideration the thesis that this is a suitable interpretation for all moral problems.

The main attraction of this view, besides yielding a plausible account of tragic choices, is that it tells a story about moral discourse which very closely parallels an emerging consensus about science, according to which the body of scientific knowledge and the meanings of scientific terms evolve together.

Literature

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