Wittgenstein's Externalism – Getting Semantic Externalism through the Private Language Argument and the Rule-Following Considerations

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I.

Since Kripke has defended that "the real 'private language argument' [P.L.A.] is to be found in the sections preceding § 243" (Kripke, 1982, p. 3) of *Philosophical Investigation* [PI], it has become an imperative – for those who want to enter the discussion - to figure out its relation to the rule-following argument [R.F.A].

In this paper, I will maintain that both arguments are connected to each other, but not in the Kripkean sense. By doing this, I will be able to offer a double externalist interpretation to them. On the one side, the P.L.A., when considered as independent from the R.F.A, will lead us to a negative formulation of the externalist thesis, through a *reductio ad absurdum* of the internalist conception of the mental. On the other side, when both arguments are considered as concerning to the same question, they will lead us to a positive defence of the externalism.

I will take *externalism* as the position that defends that mental contents are individuated with reference to external factors to the mind.

II.

A great part of the discussion about the P.L.A. is centred in the case proposed by § 258. A case where we are asked to imagine ourselves writing in a diary the occurrence of a certain "private" sensation. In this diary, we should write the sign "S" every time we had that sensation. Wittgenstein warns us with respect to the traits of this exercise: "(...) The individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language (Wittgenstein, 1953, § 243).

The notion of private language criticized by Wittgenstein involves several questions; the question about completely private experiences (in the sense that no one could have access to them but its owner), the question about the development of a language able to describe such experiences, and, the question about the possibility of a language understood only by its creator. When Wittgenstein argues against the idea of a private language, he is arguing against such notions. Furthermore, he is arguing against a specific theory of language, that one which supposes that an ostensive connection between a word and a sensation (or between a word and an object) is sufficient to establish a meaning. § 258 leads us to the ultimate consequences of thinking in those terms:

(...) A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign. —Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation. —But "I impress it on myself" can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right' (Wittgenstein, PI, § 258).

There are those who have interpreted such an argument as dealing with a skeptical problem about memory. Such an interpretation says that, although an ostensive definition can be made plausible, the problem is how to warrant the future connection between the sensation "S" to its name. However, it seems that this kind of skeptical problem is not the core of Wittgenstein's argument (Gert, 1986, p. 429). In the case proposed by § 258, the problem is not to apply the same word I am using now in the future, nor it is about how to remember the way I have used it in the past; more than that, the problem is that even in the current case we are not allowed to say that any meaning was established at all.

Another interpretation of the P.L.A. is the known defence by Kripke, that P.L.A. is not but a particular case of the R.F.A., an argument that leads us to another skeptical paradox.

The R.F.A. can be exemplified with the case proposed in § 185. In such a case, a pupil is taught to write down the series of cardinal numbers of the form 0, n, 2n, 3n, etc, at an order of the form "+n". "So at the order '+ 1' he writes down the series of natural numbers" (Wittgenstein, PI § 185). We are asked to suppose that the pupil has been tested up to 1000. Then, the pupil is asked to follow the series beyond 1000 and following the order "+2". He writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012.

We say to him: "Look what you've done!"—He doesn't understand. We say: "You were meant to add *two*: look how you began the series!"—He answers: "Yes, isn't it right? I thought that was how I was *meant* to do it."—Or suppose he pointed to the series and said: "But I went on in the same way."—It would now be no use to say: "But can't you see....?" —and repeat the old examples and explanations (Wittgenstein, PI § 185).

Kripke indicates that the core of the R.F.A. is to demonstrate that "[a]dequate reflection on what it is for an expression to possess a meaning would betray (...) that that fact could not be constituted by any of *those*"; by any "available facts potentially relevant to fixing the meaning of a symbol in a given speaker's repertoire" (Boghossian, 1989, p. 508). Under this interpretation, § 185 proposes a skeptical paradox in similar terms to what seems to be suggested in the following aphorism:

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here (...) (Wittgenstein, PI § 201).

Although this aphorism continues saying that "It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another" (Wittgenstein, PI § 201),

Kripke insists on the skeptical scenario. A scenario that spreads to the P.L.A.: nothing could fix the meaning of the sign "S", as well as nothing could fix the meaning of the sign "+2" in the pupil's case.

The solution found by Kripke to the supposed skeptical paradox is the communitarism; if there is nothing as a "semantic fact" to determinate the difference between looking right and being right, to decide about this difference is something that belongs to the community.

McDowell (1984), however, who disagrees with Kripke's interpretation, offers us not just an important criticism to that interpretation, he also shows us another way of understanding Wittgenstein's position. What McDowell does is to stress the conditions to the very perception of the skeptical paradox, insisting on the continuation of the § 201:

> (…) What this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call "obeying the rule" and "going against it" in actual cases (Wittgenstein, PI § 201).

McDowell maintains that "Kripke's paradox" occurs only if we keep considering meaning as an interpretation. The necessary step, therefore, would be to change the idea that understanding always supposes offering an interpretation. That would be Wittgenstein's lesson. If the R.F.A. does not concern the desperation of how to establish the difference between right and wrong, the Kripkean conclusion is not maintained either. If McDowell is right in his diagnosis, it is not the case that the P.L.A. is just another instance where we can verify the skeptical paradox. In the case of the sign "S", we are not allowed to say that we have established any meaning at all, but this is not the case with the sign "+2". In a sense, both arguments are connected because they both dismiss the idea of meaning as being the univocal relation between a sign and an object, or between a sign and a mental image. However, they set apart in the sense that, the case of "+2" has a correction criterion, thought not established by a semantic fact, while in the case of "S" it has not. In this sense, we could say that the P.L.A. establishes a specific criticism to the idea of mental entities giving meaning to our language. So, I propose to reformulate the P.L.A. in the following terms:

(i) Possessing a correction criterion is a condition of possibility to a language;
(ii) A private language lacks correction criteria;
(iii) A private language is impossible. There is no such a thing as a private language because it is not a language.

"Having a meaning is essentially a matter of possessing a correctness condition" (Boghossian, 1989, p. 515). The first premise seems to be widely accepted. A statement is meaningful if it can be true or false.

The second premise appears clearly at the end of § 258. The attempt to point privately to a certain sensation, to a private one, leaves us without a correction criterion. The very sensation can not itself give me such a criterion, as it seems to be supposed by an ostensive definition between the sensation and the name I give to it. Wittgenstein rejects this image, not only here, but in most parts of his work. The R.F.A. is an example of this rejection, but it appears also in the earlier aphorisms of PI, when Wittgenstein criticizes the Augustinian image of the language.

Given the two first premises, the immediate conclusion of such an argument is that the "concept of a private language is one that cannot be defended, at best, and is incoherent, at worst" (Preti, 2002, 56).

The P.L.A. has a deep externalist character. The notion of private language could indeed be elaborated in opposition to an externalist position: the components of such a "language" are not identified by external factors to the mind, but purely by internal ones. Because of that, to argue for the incoherency of such a notion opens the way to reach externalism through a *reductio ad absurdum*. And the conclusion is that it becomes unintelligible to talk, at the same time, about instances of language (it does not matter if we are talking about the world or about our subjective experiences) and about private correction criteria.

If, by arguing the P.L.A., we show the incoherency of internalism, we could consider this path as a kind of motivation to reach externalism, though a negative one. It is possible, however, to also find a positive motivation in Wittgenstein's arguments, but taking both P.L.A. and R.F.A. as working together. And this is possible if we think that, more than a criticism, they offer us an alternative option to think about meaning which does not need the idea of semantic facts.

Kripke defends that the Wittgensteinian argument leads us to communitarism. We could understand him as saying that the premise (ii) is true because any correction criterion is to be established by a community. In this sense, one could find in Kripke's interpretation some externalist appearance if we could retain the idea that individuating mental contents belongs to the community and never to oneself privately. However, the Kripkean position is much stronger than that; the community is provided with full powers to the very establishment of meanings. While this position could sound as an externalism, it would also sound as the complete isolation of the community inside itself. At this moment, "[o]ne would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to us is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'" (McDowell, 1984, p. 49, n. 12)

As I have tried to defend, not only the Kripkean interpretation does not seem to be the most satisfactory one, but his solution also causes a discomfort to which McDowell calls our attention. If in an internalist position we could be isolated from the community, now we could, all together, be isolated from the world. And this does not seem to be Wittgenstein's position, as Preti warns:

> From the fact that our fellows in the community play a constitutive role in determining content it will not follow that content is *not* the "queer", inner mental process that Wittgenstein is concerned to deny. (…) Perhaps, that is, it is true that what determines meaning or content must be partly constituted by the minds of others – but it won't follow from this that the content in *other* minds in the community isn't determined by *their* inner mental processes. Merely being *other* is not enough to thwart the inner state conception of meaning, and it may be that Wittgenstein appreciated this (Preti, 2002, p. 60).

There is, however, another way of making plausible the idea that correction criterion can only belong to the public sphere without the commitment to the communitarism. And that is possible when we realize that the institution and the application of meanings are not distinct activities. If the moments of application of meanings are so important in Wittgenstein approach, this is so because they are not separated from the moments of

institution of meanings. The externalism here would follow a more positive way than the one that was reached with the accusation of incoherence of the notion of private language. Here the meanings would be established with relation to external factors to one's mind, but also, with relation to external factors to any mind.

The positive character of Wittgenstein's argumentation is, without doubt, which brings with itself the dispute about the interpretation of his arguments. The dispute, for example, about which notion of meaning Wittgenstein defends at all. I believe, however, that it is important to point to the sense of "internal" Wittgenstein is rejecting. As Preti points well, one could understand the notion of "private" only as in opposition to "social", as Kripke does. But such a notion does not exhaust in fact all that is being rejected by Wittgenstein: "the hidden, the inner, the introspectively accessible, the mentalistic (Preti, 2002 p. 60). It seems that the externalism reached through Wittgenstein's arguments involves the rejection of all this set of notions.

Literature

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