

Wittgenstein Repudiates Metaphysical Chatter, Not Metaphysics *per se*

Earl Stanley B. Fronda, Quezon City, Philippines

efronda@kssp.upd.edu.ph

For Wittgenstein,¹ grammar creates human reality (*PI* §371, §373). Grammar delineates object-referents (*PI*, p. 193ff). The grammar of one's language shapes one's perception of the world; and that shaping comes in the form of leading one to "see-as" (*PI*, p. 194). Grammar is an inherent property of language. And language is an activity borne of the human form of life.

There certainly are different accounts of what Wittgenstein might mean by the term 'form of life'. There is the "ethnographic account," where it is equated with culture or social formation, which in turn is equated with language (Glock 1996, 125). But Wittgenstein also speaks of the "pre-linguistic" basis of a language-game (*Z*, 541), as if suggesting that language is, as it were, a superstructure that stands on a base, which is that animalistic form of life (*OC*, 358-9). Hence there is the "organic account." On this account, the term 'form of life' refers to the "complicated organic adaptation that enables [humans] to use a word" (Hunter 1968, 237). But the expression 'complicated organic adaptation' is itself in need of definition. Considering that Wittgenstein speaks of language as part of human *natural* history, one is tempted to think of human biological nature. Humans, by evolutionary happenstance, became what they are: animals with a large brain, extremely complex nervous system, highly flexible vocal chords, dexterous upper limbs, and so on. Obviously, human physiological characteristics are among the necessary conditions to doing, or to learning to do, certain activities, such as conceptualizing and articulating. All these are among the enablers that humans need in order to use, or to learn to use, words. Accordingly, to talk of complicated organic adaptation is to talk of "that which forms part of our nature, that which determines how we spontaneously find ourselves reacting... *our natural propensities*" (McGinn 1984, 55).

The capability to conceptualize and to be articulate is natural to the human species, its naturalness on a par with walking, eating, drinking and playing (*PI*, §25). It is a biological endowment that a human being is at all capable of acquiring capabilities such as, or especially, complex linguistic capability. This capability includes polysyllabic vocalisation, gesticulation, emotion, symbolization, ratiocination, and so on. To be able to do all these, one must have certain physical equipments that only nature provides.

Words are a product of biology. Birds chirp and dogs bark as a matter of course to communicate. Birds and dogs just are being what they are when they respectively chirp and bark. Similarly, when humans use words, they are just being what they are. Just as chirps and barks are respectively to the avian and the canine ways of living, words are to the human way of living (*PG*, p. 66); or, one may rather say, the human *act* of living. In that sense, then, words, just like chirps and barks, are a product of biology.

Concept formation has a biological background (*Z*, 64). Language-games regarding virtually all things are characterized both by natural human capabilities and inabilities (*Z*, 345, 368). One can imagine that had humans evolved to be slightly different than what they actually are, they would be having a form of life slightly but significantly different from what they currently have (*PI*, p. 230), with slightly different capabilities and interests. Had humans evolved differently, they would have formed a different conception of the world.

One can imagine the difference it would make had the organic human form of life evolved differently. Wittgenstein does suggest that it makes sense to think of alternative realities coinciding with alternative forms of life, and that concepts, or conceptual systems, are contingent on "certain very general facts of nature" (*PI*, p. 230); this, presumably, includes facts about *human* nature. If one imagines that only human nature, and not the rest of nature, differs from what it currently is, then one can arrive at the position that humans will have, for example, a different colour system, and even different human perception of the world in the area of colours (*Z*, 357). Accordingly, one can say that to imagine beings whose nature is different from that which humans currently have is to imagine that to them the world will appear differently coloured. And one can push the matter a little further by positing that not only in terms of colour but also in terms of shapes, consistency, temperature, and other qualities that the world will appear differently. One say that colour, shape, consistency, temperature, and other qualities in the world are not contingent on human linguistic practice; but this only means that, for instance, regardless of the status of human existence marble slabs would still reflect light in the usual way, spherical objects would still roll on level surfaces when applied with sufficient force, a falling meteor would still crush a coconut fruit equal its size, and lava would still burn lines of trees they flow over. Still, this does not preclude one from also granting that the colour, shape, consistency, temperature, and other qualities of objects would be perceived differently and would convey different significance to beings whose nature differs from humans in their current nature. This shows that the aforementioned qualities of objects, *as humans can ever be cognizant of them*, are contingent to a significant extent on human nature.

This point leads to the suggestion, which is: If *human* reality is created by the grammar of language, and if language is itself borne of the human form of life, then it follows that reality *as it is spoken of* is to some significant extent humanly created.

Be that as it may, Wittgenstein unmistakably acknowledges that there is such a thing as human-independent reality: e.g. that the earth existed long before sentient beings on it did, that the physical universe is independent of human perception, and so on, are, he argues, *certainities*. They are immune from doubt and have no need for justification for they precede both doubt and justification. They are the scaffolding of human thought, the foundation of language-games, the inherited background against which true and false is distinguished, the hinges against which questions and doubts turn (*OC*, §§94-5, 136, 211, 308, 341-3, 401-3, 614, 655). It is a matter of certainty

¹ The following are abbreviations of Wittgenstein's works cited here: CV = Culture and Value, LC = Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Beliefs, OC = On Certainty, PI = Philosophical Investigations, PG = Philosophical Grammar, PR = Philosophical Remarks, Z = Zettel.

that the world, and all the things that might constitute it, exists independently of human perception. So, for instance, “the existence of [horses and giraffes, colours and shapes] is not [a product of human linguistic practice], either in fact or in Wittgenstein” (Anscombe 1981, 121); as far as Wittgenstein goes, their substantive existence is a certainty.

Immanuel Kant famously proposed that knowledge of the world is necessarily mediated by the categories of human understanding, and as a necessary consequence the world that humans could ever know is, as it were, the world that is re-presented by and in accordance with the said categories; thus, the world as it appears to humans is quite different from the world *per se*. The human take on the world is already a re-presentation, and such a representation may not be the only legitimate take on the world. By replacing the Kantian buzz word ‘categories’ with ‘form of life’ a position analogous to Kant’s can be plausibly read into Wittgenstein; and this is a tempting prospect when one considers Wittgenstein’s remark: “We are involved here with the Kantian solution of the problem of philosophy” (CV, p. 13). The suggestion is clear that there is, for Wittgenstein (*a la* Kant), the human-supervening reality on the one hand, and human-independent natural reality on other.

Wittgenstein observes: “I want to say: an education quite different from ours might also be the foundation for quite different concepts” (Z, 387). “For here life would run on differently.—What interests us would no longer interests *them*. Here different concepts would no longer be unimaginable. In fact, this is the only way in which essentially different concepts are imaginable” (Z, 388). Here Wittgenstein in effect says that what is of interest to a people is contingent on the form of life they happen to be raised in. (What is of interest is that which excites natural attention, affectation or concern, especially in respect of beneficence or detriment: anything that could possibly be within the realm of human sensual perception, knowledge, imagination, appreciation, desire, will, or way of articulation is of human interest.) This particular passages just quoted at least suggests the ethnographic form of life as directing human interest; but one can take by extension that the organic form of life, too, directs human interest, and do so in an even more fundamental way. The organic human form of life determines what is of interest to an organism (PI, §570). This means that the human form of life sets the extent of human interest; and the extent of human interest is certainly not limitless.

If there is a limit, then there is that which transcends it. The transcendent, on this score, is that which is beyond the reach of the normal provisions of the organic form of life (the *given* of a form of life: e.g. the range of a species’ physiological equipments, capabilities, adaptation, and behaviour.) All that humans can be interested in are those things that can be given to them, which means those that are already mediated by their organic form of life. The contingency of reality as humans grasp it on human nature opens up a temptation to posit a dimension of the world that humans are cognizant of, and a dimension of that same world untinged by the mediation of the human form of life. The position may be stated thus: “The world *per se* is different from the world as it appears.” Therefore, there is definitely that which transcends human, or indeed creaturely, discourse. It cannot be helped that that which is transcendent cannot simply be dismissed as a “nothing.” (A “nothing” in this sense is a purported *entity* that actually does not exist; its opposite is a “something,” an existing entity).

To posit a transcendent not only makes sense but is also called for: It does not make sense to speak of a limit without that which transcends it. Yet that which is transcendent is of no epistemological interest for it is in principle inscrutable; and it is of no semantic interest for statements that purport to refer to it cannot really do so. Thus is the transcendent: it transcends scrutability and expressibility.

Any chatter about that which is beyond the normal provisions of the human form of life, such as talk about the transcendent (the so-called Ultimate Reality, or the Essence of the World, or even the Other Mind) is *metaphysical chatter*, a chatter that, as it were, bumps against the limits of language. It is chatter about that which cannot be of real human interest, given the human form of life. Wittgenstein shuns it, not because of the lack of truth of the statements that are issued in it, but because the said statements are otiose as speaking of the transcendent is ultimately futile. There cannot be any point at all in making metaphysical claims for such a claim cannot in principle be tested for verisimilitude. For example, the metaphysical statement ‘Possibly everyone is in pain but does not show it’: if a pain cannot be known to exist by anyone other than the subject who feels it, then there is in principle no way this statement can be checked for verisimilitude, and as such can never be useful as a claim. Any bet made on a metaphysical “claim,” unlike the bet made on the most trivial empirical claim, can never produce results. It does not matter if there is or there is not an essence of an object (or of colour, or whatever), or whether or not a number signifies an entity in some trans-material realm, or that a certain unexpressed inner process is occurring: they are of no interest to humans, i.e. they have absolutely no bearing on their natural (including scientific) concerns. Making a stand on these matters, whether it is an affirmative or a negative one, produces claims that are otiose. If the essence of an object, of a number, or of whatever else, happens to be a “something,” then at best it is a “something about which nothing could be said” and for all significant human interest and purposes could serve no better than a “nothing” (PI, §304).

It must be noted that the main concern of the (mature) Wittgenstein is a linguistic matter: the description or clarification of the nature of language. “Philosophy,” so says Wittgenstein, “is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (PI, §109). It is his view that a good number of the issues in philosophy are borne of “grammatical illusions” (PI, §110). His purpose for describing or clarifying the nature of language is for the disentanglement of misunderstandings from which many a philosophical puzzle proceeds in the hope that the disentanglement would ease out these puzzles (PI, §§124-133).

But while Wittgenstein lays down his position on matters that are for all intents and purposes linguistic matters, points that properly belong to ontology rather than mere linguistics are, rightly or wrongly, drawn from his position. It seems fair enough to take his positions in linguistics to be carrying implications relevant to ontology. But it also seems easy, in representing him, to confuse linguistic matters with ontological ones (and as a result of such confusion there are those misguided issues about him being an “idealist,” or “anti-realist,” or “fideist”). Actually, all he wants to do is to show how language represents reality, and apropos to that, how far language can represent reality. He shows no inclination to deal with the issue of how far reality goes. He does unmistakably suggest that the world *per se* is independent of human perception; and his position clearly leads to the further suggestion

that reality may have dimensions other than that which is given to, and are transcendent of, human perception.

However, about explicitly making declarations that appropriately belong to ontology his philosophy dictates that he must be very reticent, for “[w]hat belongs to the essence of the world cannot be expressed in language.... Language can only say those things we could also imagine otherwise” (PR, 83). So to extend the characterization of his linguistics to ontology is going a parlous step too far. If his anthropocentric and sociocentric linguistics lead him anywhere at all, it is not towards ontological pluralism or a proliferation of ontologies but towards, as it were, ontological aphasia. About the transcendent, the mature Wittgenstein simply opts for silence. Or rather, amid circulating talk about the transcendent, he calls for silence. Being unable to make any affirmation or denial about metaphysical matters without straying into otiosity, the mature Wittgenstein, not unlike the Tractarian Wittgenstein who sought for the “transference of all metaphysical essences to the realm of the unutterable... *without a denial of metaphysical beliefs*” (Engelmann 1967, 143; italics added), simply consigns ontological (or metaphysical) matters to silence.

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