# Wittgenstein's Conception of Moral Universality

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A major criticism of particularist readings of Wittgenstein is arbitrariness and incommensurability. It can have no meaningful account of moral conflict because people who do not agree on a certain issue may simply have different language games and forms of life (Holtzman and Leich 1981). In such a case, they do not really disagree; they do not understand each other. They do not play the same language game or are incapable of playing the same language game because they have different forms of life. Critics claim that if they have no justification for judging as they do other than fact that they are trained or predisposed to judge that way turns their judgment into biases. While historical particularists present a communal criteria for evaluating judgments, these criteria when opposed by other practices turns out to be nothing but another preference which cannot be criticized. Thus, it becomes impossible to criticize other people's practices however unjust we think them to be (e.g. female genital mutilation, suttee, etc.)

Given this limitation, is it really accurate to interpret Wittgenstein as a particularist? Does Wittgenstein's discussion of rule following imply that morality is the mere endorsement of preferences, communal or otherwise? Given Wittgenstein's emphasis on the priority of approaching problems via particular language games does it make sense to assert that Wittgenstein has a conception of Universality at all? When we reason about morality, is it best to approach it via principles that allow us to be consistent with previous cases? Or is the very notion of consistency, of going on in the same way, different in every case?

Another look at how Wittgenstein's rule following considerations relates with the nature of language games and shared forms of life will show the falsity of this dichotomy. There are universal principles but those universal principles allow for different application in varying cases. While not excluding the possibility of identifying violations of the principle, judgment on the varying ways of responding to moral requirements need not conflict with the presence of universal principles; they are even mutually determining. This notion of moral universality, however, can at best be presented in form of a paradox.

## Wittgenstein's conception of moral objectivity: the paradox of universality

We learn rules via language games and language games are possible because we share a form of life. But a form of life is not to be understood as a mere convention made possible by social pressure or human agreement. This puts human agreement in an external rather than internal relationship with the creations of rules and concepts, and confuses Wittgenstein's stand with conventionalism (Baker and Hacker 1985). In applying a concept or rule, we do not decide individually or communally. Though there are still different ways of applying the rule, we all experience a natural compulsion to apply the rule in one way rather than the other. This agreement or natural compulsion is non linguistic and inarticulate as it is part of the very framework through which language games are possible.

When we say we will use a word this way we do not just agree to it in words. There are uses of words that sound awkward or appear too artificial to be successfully put into practice. There is a natural acceptability that comes with the use of certain words that is independent of individual or communal preference. We take them for granted and notice them only when they are violated. This natural agreement on action which precede any linguistic articulation is a form of life. This agreement is the initial condition not the result of language use. In so far as, following a rule is also part of a form of life, the particular applications of a moral principle can be viewed as something that is independent of both individual and communal preference. This makes it possible to identify mistakes made by individual and community or to evaluate whether a practice is evil or not.

This is not to situate criticism and evaluation from a view that is external to human responses. What is emphasized is that there is a regularity that characterizes those responses that becomes the basis through which conventions and customs become possible. See for example the distinct human forms of life necessary for an ostensive definition to be intelligible. Does 'This' refer to the object, to a feature of the object, to the pointing gesture? (PI 6,28,38,45) Though an ostensive definition can be misunderstood in many ways, the fact that we share a form of life allows it to be understood in the same way. This is not to say that there is only one form of life or that our form of life doesn't change. It means that even differences occur within a framework of commonalities which we take for granted.

Form of life refers to the regularity in action and the world which makes the formation of concepts possible. Sometimes it is interpreted in terms of convention but it is more fundamental than convention because it is the means through which conventions become possible. There are different language games and different forms of life. Different language games may come from different or the same form of life. But all language games come from a form of life that is basic to all human beings. (Garver 1994)

Language games and forms of life are mutually determining. Language games are possible because we share a human form of life. These language games allow us to share a form of life that is unique to a community. This form of life in turn allows for the creation of new language games and forms of life and so on. We always create different types of agreements (are on our way to establishing new forms of life) when we engage in language games. Hence, the number and type of language games that can be played is determined by the forms of life or relationships that are established. Dialogues or any linguistic activity are always moves towards a shared form of life.

Moral dilemmas (what McDowell calls hard cases because they cannot be resolved by moral principles) are cases calling for attempts to share a form of life (McDowell 1981). Once we examine via language games, via different perspectives and details, our views overlap no matter how much divergence is left. So while it does call for a creative decision on what to say. This decision is not totally unguided for a shared and often inarticulate sense of what

will count as creative also emerges, such that even if we do not take the same decision we can come to understand or even agree to the decisions others take. This shared sense is also what allows for the recognition of mistakes, even from the perspective of the individual or community itself (Wright 2007). The same thing happens when we acquire the ability to recognize the varied applications of a moral principle while being able to separate it from its violations.

Human forms of life are not static. It is a complex combination of biological disposition, facts of nature, and cultural training that defies any analysis or further simplification because it will fail to give due attention to the part that other aspects play (Garver 1994). Hence, Wittgenstein's stand cannot be reduced to behaviorism, conventionalism, or solipsism. Suffice it to say that it is the changing regularity that those things make possible which allows for the formation of concepts, rules and the acquisition of language.

The only meaningful conception of universality possible is one that is grounded in a changing form of life. Universality is a family resemblance concept. It is a universality that is a matter of degree where the scope is not something fixed or predetermined and the application is always varied. Though that universality cannot be defined or articulated, it is shown in the flux of action. The fact that our criteria for going in the same way may be different and variable does not mean there is no such thing as going on in the same way.

Following a rule both consists of doing the same thing and doing something different at the same time (PI 226). While you are applying the same rule, different situations call for different applications of the rule. Given another situation the same use of the word or rule can be interpreted differently but this does not mean that no rule was followed or that we are now concerned with another rule. Rules can change and yet remain the same. Similarly, the fact that different situations seems to call for different ways of applying a universal moral principle does not mean that there is no such thing as universal moral principle. Universality is an indeterminate concept but it is not meaningless.

Universality becomes nonsensical when its demands are conceived metaphysically; confused with platonic ideals that situate right and wrong applications of a rule from a point of view outside shared human responses to act, feel and understand. Such ideals are incoherent and impossible to satisfy (Crary 2000).This view expresses itself in the notion that rules always need specification so that they will allow for less judgment because the less judgment a rule allows the more objective it becomes. This is also the ideal that inclines us to think that examples are insufficient proof of understanding and that there is something else we have to look for which will fill the gap between a rule and its application.

Wittgenstein's conception of universality and objectivity is not legalistic or deterministic in this sense. Rules even with very elaborate specifications do not pre-empt judgment for the cases where they apply and the ways they can be applied cannot be contained in the rule itself. There will always be room for style and technique in judgment and this is something that cannot be taught or explained. The best that can be done is to give examples of how to go on the same way. It is in those very examples that we are able to grasp the universal, it is in them that the universal exists. As such, Wittgenstein does not offer any thing to fill the gap between the rule and its application because there is no sense in seeing a gap in the first place.

While Wittgenstein emphasizes judgment amidst variability and difference, he does not idealize differences. There are differences and family resemblances concepts but Wittgenstein does not say that all concepts consist of family resemblances or that family resemblance concepts can have any meaning they have. Family resemblance concepts are permissive, but they also have exclusion criteria. If this were not the case, they would cease to be concepts. There is no such thing as a concept that is totally unbounded by any rule that they can be applied in all cases. Concepts are possible because of rules. Even with family resemblance concepts, there are still rules which determine what particular applications make sense. All judgments, though distinct from rules, are made possible by means of rules.

So Wittgenstein is not saying that we do not employ rules when we attempt to understand or learn. All activities, including moral evaluation, are rule governed. But if we conceive of rules as something that comes prior to the activities, rather than as rules that are discovered or made in the course of those activities, then we will be mistaken. The applications of moral principles do not exist independently from us in the way rails of a train are already there even before the train gets there (PI 218-219). If we think in that manner, we will be unable to distinguish variations of the moral principle from their violations.

Even if the circumstances for the application of the rule are never completely the same, this does not mean that rules do not guide us at all in dealing with different cases. Even if cases are characterized by differences, they also contain similarities that allow us to treat them in the 'same' way. This also does not mean that rules do not need specifications. It means that specification may only be relevant or useful when the need arises. Precision has a limit; rules can only be as precise as the purposes they satisfy. Viewed in this manner, specifications will aid, rather than prevent, us from attending to the needs of different cases.

Thus Wittgenstein's view on how to approach morality via language games and forms of life to account for both the sensitivity to different cases and the sense of consistency to allow for accounts of justice or fairness. Appeals to language games and forms of life also allow or may even require the use of moral principles. They also do not amount to the mere endorsement of preferences because they are the brute conditions of sense. Also, they are still able to provide independent criteria for identifying mistakes which makes it possible for the community to evaluate even the morality of their own practices.

This view leaves everything as it is. It does not count as another account of moral universality and objectivity in place of Platonism. An account of universality grounded in evolving language games and forms of life should not be interpreted as a thesis on relativism or even as another thesis on objectivity. It merely undercuts unreasonable demands on how we conceive of objectivity and universality in the actual guidance and adjudication of moral judgments.

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