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Comment on Poulain's Paper: Propositional Truth and Agent's Knowledge

From Poulain's paper several charges against Wittgenstein can be extracted: Wittgenstein's therapeutic strategy against conceptual confusions (which allegedly arise when language-games go idle)¹ is misconceived and turns on his dismissal of the theoretical-philosophical moment of judgment of (universal) truth. In Poulain's view, Wittgenstein's diagnosis leads mistakenly to an attempt to show the flies the way back into the pre-given practical or transcendental set-up (which has to *show* itself) and to an exorcising of validity-claims. This, however, must lead (against Wittgenstein's own concern) to a privatization of language beyond cure. Furthermore – and not unconnected – Wittgenstein seems to disregard the *acts* of the philosophical subject or interlocutor quite generally, acts like affirming or judging propositions (to be true). He misconstrues speech acts, their illocutionary forces and validity-claims. The pertinent kind of judgement, Poulain says, "was excluded by Wittgenstein. It is none the less what is presupposed in every utterance and as such something that nobody can prohibit. Everybody who utters or thinks a proposition must judge its objectivity by judging the objectivity of its truth. This law of truth is

¹ I take Poulain's reconstruction to something like this: According to Wittgenstein "confusions are produced ... by the failure of communication with others" and are (traditionally and mistakenly) seen either as a psychological problem or as a lack of that kind of agreement with our partners "which could be produced by argumentation, in other words philosophically." To activate philosophical reflection at this point, however, would be, in Wittgenstein's view, "to find a theoretical solution for a practical problem".

valid not only for the cognitive propositions — the so-called 'descriptive' propositions — but also for the prescriptive ones and for the propositions expressing feelings and mental states."

I think these allegations are hardly warranted as they stand in Poulain's paper, although they are not quite arbitrary either. In what follows, I will try to make clear my own view on these questions, having recourse to Poulain's account.

1. *Logical harmony.* Let me start with Wittgenstein's therapeutic ambition (in *Philosophical Investigations*) and its parallel in *Tractatus*, the condemnation of his own statements as senseless. According to Poulain, "[t]he Wittgensteinian therapy is based upon a dynamic view of language which is both similar to and opposed to the logical view of language developed in the *Tractatus*. The concept of language-game is founded upon a [idea of] harmony between words and perception, words and action and words and desire. When the language-game is working this harmony makes up the consensus with our partners, with ourselves and with the world. In this way the harmony between our words and our life is presupposed in much the same way as the logical harmony between our propositional pictures and the depicted facts was presupposed [in *Tractatus*]."

It is true that Wittgenstein postulates a kind of preestablished "harmony" between propositions and facts in *Tractatus*, a harmony which is indeed a presupposition for truth (and falsity). But this harmony, viz. the correspondence between objects and names, and the sameness in logical form between the world of facts and language, is not so suspect as Poulain suggests. It is, of course, not meant as any apriori determination of which propositions are, in fact, true. On the contrary, it is a precondition for propositions' openness

and bipolarity as to "yes" and "no". (2.201, 4.023f.) So, when Poulain counts as a shortcoming of the *Tractatus* that it disregards the judging subject, that "the facts of the world – and not the scientists – had to judge the truth of the elementary propositions" (which could at most be done "if the world had been completely analyzed")² he is in my view much too hasty and overlooks that the transcendental "harmony" does not *compete* with the business of science, which is to ascertain contingent truth, but is its precondition. Of course we must have it *both* ways, and according to *Tractatus* we do have it both ways: the *subject* projects a picture (of a possible state of affairs), asserts a proposition (as true); and it depend on the world (and in so far the *world* decides ("judges")) whether the proposition is true. But the transcendental set-up ("harmony") is the precondition for both "judgements".

It might indeed seem as if Poulain's picture of Wittgenstein lacks one dimension, such that a certain necessary multiplicity collapses. It overlooks that both in *Tractatus* and in *Philosophical Investigations* the "harmony" makes out the logical *frame* on the basis of which we can project or claim contingent matters, it is not as such already a true-or-false *theory*, it does not compete with science.³

2. *Linguistic harmony*. If we turn to the *Philosophical Investigations*, the preestablished "harmony" essentially includes a kind of agreement

² Cf. also: "The occurrence or non-occurrence of the described facts is not sufficient for certifying the truth or falsity of our propositions." [The scientific subject and its judgement is also necessary]

³ The obliteration of the distinction between empirical theory (truth) and transcendental preconditions is, of course, no speciality of Poulain (if he makes himself guilty of it) but rather a general feature of recent holism, e.g. in Quine. (Cf. my essay "Die Verabsolutierung des Begriffs der empirischen Theorie – der Fall Quine" in Böhler/Kuhlman (eds.): *Kommunikation und Reflexion*, Suhrkamp 1982.)

between language-users. The social and institutional character of language, its essential non-private character, is stressed. Poulain links this up with anthropological considerations clearly reminiscent of Arnold Gehlen. "Human beings are not endowed with extra-specific instincts like the other well-formed living beings. A human being is not programmed to perceive stimuli and to link this perception to the 'right' reactions and answers in order to get the consummatory actions that it needs. Confronted with the impossibility to perceive the world and to answer its own perceptions in a preformed manner, a human being is obliged to feel itself in a kind of hiatus with the world. It ... cannot but feel ... anguish. In order to overcome this anguish, a human being has to learn a language." The adjustments of language [which mediates between our inner world, our actions, our social partners and the world] are normally "no subject of reflection". "When the language-game is working, these adjustments are given as the world we breath in. ... But as soon as the language-game does not work, beliefs, desires and intentions disappear. Then it produces a 'social contradiction'; mutual disagreements as well as conceptual confusions following from this situation. In this way the original hiatus appears again and again."

So far Poulain seems to agree with Wittgenstein (as he pictures him). But then Poulain goes on to announce his disagreement and to show that Wittgenstein misses the remedy or the only move which can relieve us in this situation: the law of truth. Wittgenstein misses the role of truth as it is inescapably involved in acts like affirming "because he believed ... that language comes after visual perception and builds itself as a copy of this one. But it is the contrary which is the case; as a living being born one year too early and as thus being an aborted being, it has to utter sounds in order to see its environment and in order to do what it does and what it has to do."

The point seems to be once more that Wittgenstein overloads preestablished harmony. Against the Wittgensteinian recourse to given harmony "in practice" (which may be threatened by theoretical/philosophical ambitions) Poulain again and again stresses what he considers to be the decisive move: the submission of our pictures or moves in language-games to the obligations deriving from their inescapable character of being validity-claims. "The moment of judgement by which we submit our propositions to the law of truth is indeed necessary if one wants to escape [the] short-circuited use of our phono-auditive sounds by which we invoke a preexisting agreement with the facts or with the others as a kind of preexisting auditive echo ..."

By barring this move, and "reducing truth to the correspondence with facts [*Tractatus*] or to consensus with our social partners and with our life [*Philosophical Investigations*] Wittgenstein ... excluded the only move which allows us to leave our biological, original and chronic disarray." Wittgenstein was "unable to see that this philosophical move defines our ordinary use of language as well as every illocutionary speech-act". He neglected or did not understand "what happens when we speak, what is in act in every speech-act: the philosophical use of judgement". But, says Poulain, the philosophical law of truth can only be avoided at the price of giving every linguistic move an autistic character and of privatizing whatever efforts we make to reach out toward others and even our therapeutic efforts to dissolve our cramps.

3. *Alternative or supplement.* I feel sympathy with much of this. There is, however, also the feeling that things are not sorted out properly and put in their right place (with the right kind of limitation). Or — again — I feel that Poulain's account suffers from a lack of

differentiation which may nullify his good points. Let me try to sustain this somewhat.

First, it is not quite easy to say what Poulain's position is with regard to the "Gehlen" point. At times he obviously seems to side with it. The way out of man's original (distressing) "openness" has to pass by (linguistic) socialization and institutions. This would then be in perfect harmony with the Wittgensteinian attacks against the illusions of some kind of sovereign "inner", mental instance (the intending subject) which is not anchored in and (also) constituted through the essentially public and "outer" medium of language. And this crucial point has of course to be recognized – as far as it goes. At other times, however, Poulain seems rather to be stressing a post-conventional (post-traditional) universalist, anti-rhetorical point, in particular the transcending and idealizing character of validity-claims (say along Apel-Habermasian lines).

Now, these two moments are certainly compatible. Indeed, in my view they both need to be emphasized. The trouble with Poulain's statement is, however, that when the latter moment is stressed, it is done in way – or so it looks to me – which refuses to give Gehlen (i.e. Wittgenstein) his due; the argument seems to be directed against "Aristotelian" traditionalism and Gehlenian institutionalism *tout court*. That is, it seems to neglect a distinction between what we could call (the) language-independence of reason "before" and "after" the advent of language; i.e. between methodic-solipsistic illusion and post-conventional universalism, or between (the idea of) "pre-social" subjectivity and (the conception of a language-dependent or language-generated) "post-social" reflexivity.

So, it is not clear to me what exactly the charge is when it comes to (Wittgenstein's ideas about) social (linguistic-practical) harmony and

para-scientific (philosophical-theoretical) cramps. The phrase "as soon as the language-game does not work" is e.g. ambiguous, not least on the background of Gehlen's perspective and Wittgenstein's possible deplorable "Gehlenianism". Does it mean the (imagined) distressing primitive state of hiatus "before" language and institutions ("uses") —, or does it mean the situation where the language-game is indeed working, only that *we* (in Wittgenstein's view) are stupid enough, or too lazy, not to stick to it but rather leave it and take language to some kind of theoretical-philosophical holiday (§ 38)? Of course we might say — along with Gehlen — that the difference is not that important, the important thing is the sting against free-floating intellectualism and the admonition: go back to work! (An attitude which Poulain wants — or so I believe — to counteract in the name of "the law of truth".) However, in Poulain's epistemological context the distinction is important, because he does not seem content with *adding* something to the working of language-games as a logical precondition, completing the picture, as it were (in this case we could agree to the Wittgensteinian-Gehlenian handling of the primitive state as far as it goes and only criticize its insufficiency). Poulain seems to want to *replace* it. But this throws us back into the primitive "state of nature" and the question: what is Poulain's *alternative* to the Wittgensteinian-Gehlenian styling of human intentional life through institutions and language-games?

At this point, strangely enough, Poulain seems to offer the law of truth as his solution: "The moment of judgement by which we submit our propositions to the law of truth" — allegedly neglected by Wittgenstein — seems to be offered as "the only move which allows us to leave our biological original and chronic disarray". But this is confusing. Firstly, it claims far too much from the law of truth, and it conflicts with Poulain's Gehlenianism when we read the remark made in the beginning that to overcome the original anguish "a

human being has to learn a language". Nevertheless Poulain seems to insist, as when he writes: "The common logical form between propositions and facts cannot be something which can be presupposed as a preexisting harmony. Instead ... this harmony of objectivity ... is *posed* [my emphasis, AØ] by the predication, the use of referring expressions and the affirmation of the proposition which judges itself to be true ..." It seems, indeed rather clear that Poulain's remedy against the anguish of the "state of nature" is not logical form or language as a form of life, but the *positings* or (validity) *claims* inherent in human speech acts. This, however, must be a rather extreme overloading of the illocutionary force of human statements. It isn't that strong.

4. *Agreement*. A further point concerns the notion of agreement and Wittgensteinian therapy. Throughout Poulain's paper, I have the feeling that he levels the difference between agreement in opinions and agreement in language or form of life. At times one has the impression that he wants to replace "preexisting agreement" of the latter kind with agreement on truthclaims and other validity-claims. (This would be a kind of reverse to the move of Heidegger, when he somehow dismisses the trivial, apophantic "correspondence" truth and favours a notion of emphatic truth, truth as destiny of being, the advent of which is an "opening up" of a world (Lichtung, logical space, meaning-universe).⁴) Or perhaps he rather makes too much out of the Quine-Davidsonian denial of the distinction between what

⁴ My position would be once more that we must have it both ways. The emphatic notion concerns the preexisting space *within* which apophantic truth is possible (and necessary). (Cf. E. Tugendhat: *Der Wahrheitsbegriff bei Husserl und Heidegger*, Berlin 1970 and G. Skirbekk: "La vérité chez Heidegger", in: *Rationalité et Modernité*, Paris: L'Harmattan 1992)

belongs to language (meaning) and what depends on matters of fact.⁵

In any case, we have to distinguish between harmony, agreement ("Verständigung") as a logical and hermeneutical *presupposition* of sense (and thus for the *seeking* of agreement through linguistic-argumentative exchange generally), and harmony, agreement (Verständigung) as a *result* of discussion etc. The first kind of agreement is a precondition for that kind of "agreement with our partners which could be produced by argumentation" *as well as* a precondition for *disagreement*. We can have a lot of disagreement of the latter kind without destroying *language* (indeed, language is a precondition of disagreement), whereas disagreement at the first level equals – if Wittgenstein's argument against private languages is valid – the disappearance of language.

In PI § 242 Wittgenstein talks about the agreement between language-users which belongs to linguistic meaning, as an agreement which is not only an agreement in "definitions" "but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements." But Wittgenstein does not really by this move obliterate the distinction between *presuppositions* for linguistic exchange (what belongs to the language-game, to the rules, as it were) and possible *results* of such exchange. His point does *not* "abolish logic". Let us recall § 241: "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" – It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life."

⁵ At least from the speaker's point of view this distinction *has* to be presupposed: the speaker *uses* language to *say* something.

It is, of course, crucial not to abolish the distinction between linguistic agreement as something (if private languages are impossible) beyond which there is nothing — i.e. agreement as something which opens up the "space" in which our opinions move — and on the other hand agreement as synchronization of opinions, as parallel moves or the like. The first is a condition for the possibility of *having* opinions, converging or diverging, for the very possibility of agreement and disagreement. To overlook this would indeed be to abolish logic. And it would be to destroy the good sense of Wittgenstein's game metaphor: we agree on the (constitutive) rules of the play — which is a precondition for playing — but *within* the play we have options and different players make different, opposite moves (we can disagree in our moves in a lot of ways, even if we may agree in the last resort in our evaluations or judgements on the moves (which are good and which are bad)). Of course, we must — and we can have — both things simultaneously: agreement in language and a vast variety in *what we say*. Acceptance of a "law of truth" should be no problem either. Poulain, however, seems to me to simplify the picture and to put us before a dilemma where both horns are equally impossible: to accept the logical necessity of some preestablished — quasi-transcendental? — scaffolding or harmony (agreement in language) and deny the law of truth; *or* to deny the mentioned necessity and having recourse to the law of truth exclusively.

True, Wittgenstein says that we follow rules blindly, but this does not make him an authoritarian conservative which denies autonomy and the role of argument. The blindness pertains to the constitutive rules. Even when we follow the rules of chess blindly, we do not play it blindly (the rules do not prescribe the play). We do follow the constitutive rules of the language-game of giving orders (and obeying) blindly, but we do not give and follow *orders* blindly (at

least we should not, and Wittgenstein does not claim that we should). The language-game of asking questions and answering also has its constitutive rules, which we follow blindly (when we master the language); but we do not answer questions blindly, as a rule we try to be truthful. (A question does in a sense prescribe *some* answer, but not its content.)

5. (*Cognitive*) Acts. As for validity-claims I will not defend Wittgenstein to the bitter end. I do in fact believe that something has to be added. Even if there is a considerable progress in his views on this point from *Tractatus* to *Philosophical Investigations* there is something left to be wanted (which concerns the "law of truth" and which has indeed to do with Wittgenstein's treatment of philosophy). But let me confine myself to the mentioned progress. The saying/showing thesis of *Tractatus*, according to which the miracle that language — and we in using language — perform cannot be *said*, but has to *show* itself (in that use). Logical form, which is common to world and language and which makes depicting or saying possible, cannot itself be said, i.e. depicted. But Wittgenstein's attempt to save the transcendental form or *limit* of the world which makes logical pictures of facts possible from being a depictible fact in the world, is in a way overdrawn or too radical.

For one thing, it keeps from being verbalized those "forces" and acts through which logical pictures are projected. If "epistemological" verbs (think, say, know ...) have a place at all in the *Tractatus* theory, then *either* purely "transcendentally" in the act of projecting (in the first person, as it were) — *or* (in the third person form) as a part of natural science, i.e. (psychologically) as depicting something happening *in* the world (not in logic) (4.11). Thanks to the "either" part one cannot simply say that truth and the thinking of propositions as true do not have a proper "transcendental" role in the

Tractatus. (But one can in a sense regret that *truth* is absolutized and "acts" and forces other than those of describing states of affairs are suppressed. See below.) But first of all there is no *mediation* between what shows itself in the use of language (in the first person) and what is stated or said in the third person. In the third person form our thinking and saying ("A thinks p") has to be analyzed *either* as illegitimate sentences of the form "'p' says p" or somehow as (behaviouristic?) statements within natural science. This lack of mediation would in a sense dissolve our (natural) language into *two* languages; one (behaviouristic) observation language — with associated theoretical language — in which other subjects are depicted — along with the rest of the world, a language in which I can *say* (i.e. depict) what they do and say, and one language in which I form/articulate my consciousness (my intentions) and/or my acts and possibly *show* myself in colloquy (through my speech acts).

However, perhaps we are not entitled after all to state the "either" part. Perhaps all we can say is that Wittgenstein — in talking about the "philosophical" subject — marks the place where epistemological verbs would belong; that he, in contradistinction to Kant, does *not* assert that an "I think" has to accompany all our propositional pictures.⁶ If we distinguish, along with the saying-showing-doctrine, between two kinds of consciousness: consciousness of objects and *act-consciousness* (Tugendhat, E.: *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die sprachanalytische Philosophie*, 1976: 82f.) it is clear that the latter doesn't really have any language according to the *Tractatus*

⁶ We could put it this way: When it comes to verbs for the (spontaneous) actions of our understanding Wittgenstein does not even provide a room for an "I think" which has to accompany all my "pictures". But, contrary to Kant, he does make an attempt to analyze "A thinks p". His analysis can, however, hardly be accepted. And no wonder if he doesn't succeed; in his perspective the first person present tense form is lacking!

construction. Rather we must say that an act-constitutive language is *missing* in *Tractatus*. A language, in which the transcendental (philosophical) I can form its "agent's knowledge" (Ch. Taylor) is left out or somehow reduced to the logical power itself, which directs language — as depicting — toward the world. (*Tractatus* 5.54ff.) Maybe this is so, while the *use* of language is "one-dimensional" in *Tractatus*: all actforming verbs, which might have differentiated the use of world-depicting propositions, reduce themselves to this single one: the thinking of the sentence meaning (as description), and so such verbs become *redundant*.⁷ According to the picture-theory of *Tractatus* language reduces itself to the "p"s, the propositions which depict possible states of affairs and the facts of the world. The act itself is not articulated, apart from its pictural content.

All of this is thoroughly amended in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The ("transcendental"-act-)monism of *Tractatus* is exploded. We are now told that there is no fundamental canonical logical form (or force), but a multitude of kinds ("countless" kinds says Wittgenstein). Acts and act-verbs are now abundant, and first of all, he now envisages a (anti-Cartesian and anti-Kantian) *mediation* between the performativ-expressive act-constituting *use* of verbs in the first person (which *do not depict the act*) and depicting *non-first-person-present-tense* uses which *say* who does what. The "doctrine of showing" certainly recurs somehow in *Philosophical Investigations* too, but it is now a matter of course that act-verbs have a role in the first person present tense as *act-constituting* forms of consciousness, most conspicuously as performative or expressive utterings in language-games, as well as descriptive roles. We can link this up with Wittgenstein's new theory of the constitution of "psychological" verb

⁷ That is, one could imagine at least a distinction between "I think (assert, judge) that p" and "I consider (hypothetically) that p" corresponding to the distinction between states of affairs (Sachverhalte) and facts (Tatsachen).

phrases generally. These predicates (their meanings) are now conceived of as having essentially *two* roots. Accordingly, "A thinks that p" is now treated quite differently from what it was in the analysis of the *Tractatus*. In *Tractatus* it was interpreted as an illegitimate statement which tries to *say* what cannot be said but has to *show* itself. Now, the first person perspective (the "own case", including the performative intention-in-action: "I think that p" (the thinking of p)) *and* the third person perspective (including *observation* of thinking and speaking people) are both considered as necessary for the meaning of the verb.

To sum this up: Substitution of the first person must be possible (against objectivism/scientism), declination must be possible (against dualism) and paralogisms must (and can) be avoided!

A last word: I still think that Poulain is right in claiming that there are some deficiencies in point of universalism in (the later) Wittgenstein.