WITTGENSTEIN AND THE LIMITS OF SKEPTICISM

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In his last text, *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein develops his ideas on skepticism and the limits of knowledge. At the end of his life, Wittgenstein sought to describe the structure of our knowledge and derive epistemological conclusions from his linguistic analysis of epistemic terms. His reflections on the notion of doubt and its role in our language allow him to distinguish knowledge from certainty, and to view skepticism in a new way. In order to consider whether Wittgenstein's strategy succeeds or fails, we must first examine some of the difficulties surrounding his approach to skepticism.

1. Analysis of the notion of "doubt"

A good way to understand the epistemological assertions that *On Certainty* contains, is to reflect upon Wittgenstein's analysis of the notion of doubt. The study of the role of "doubt" in our language and of the behaviours associated with the use of that term, allow Wittgenstein to view the problem of skepticism in a novel way.

Wittgenstein points out that the skeptical doubt is not, even if it seems to be, a radicalization of daily doubt. On the contrary, it is something rather different. Wittgenstein emphasizes that in the process that goes from doubting a particular something to doubting anything in general, our doubt looses gradually its meaning. At some point, it even ceases to be conceivable.

> For it is not true that a mistake merely gets more and more improbable as we pass from the planet to my own hand. No; at some point it has ceased to be conceivable. (54)

In my opinion, Wittgenstein's most interesting argument against global skepticism lies in his assertion that any doubt presupposses the command of a language game. That is, we can only doubt a proposition if we first understand what the proposition means. I can only deny that I know that this is a hand, if I have previously understood what it means to say that this is a hand.

> 306: "I dont know if this is a hand·" But do you know what the word "hand" means? And don't say "I know what it means now for me". And isn't it an empirical fact - that this word is

used like this?

Wittgenstein states that understanding a proposition requires us to know how to use that proposition correctly. Hence, any doubt we may place about a proposition must take into account the language game in which that proposition is embedded. In other words, we cannot deny a proposition with independence of which are our linguistic practices.

24:"What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?" ... But someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works in a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like?

As a result of this approach, Wittgenstein concludes that doubting must always come to an end. A speaker who raises questions without stopping at some point, does not abide by the rules that govern our communicative praxis. The game of questions and answers has its own rules, and they must be observed. At certain point, it makes no sense to raise further questions. Thus who does not cease to raise objections, does not play the game of doubting well. When the skeptic exercises his doubt without coming to an end, he places himself out of the language game in which doubting consists.

Hence, Wittgenstein appeals to our linguistic practices and the way we learn them, to show that we can doubt particular facts in particular circumstances, but that we cannot doubt them all at a time. In this manner, he shows that to sustain the skeptical doubt implies to reject our linguistic practices. But this possibility is not, of course, in our hand. It is important to clarify here that Wittgenstein does not refer to a mere incapacity on our side, but to an essential feature of our way of judging.

232 "We could doubt every single one of these facts, but we could not doubt them all. Would n't it be more correct to say: "we do not doubt them all". Our not doubting them all is simply our manner of judging, and therefore of acting.

450: A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt.

247: What would it be like to doubt now whether I have two hands? Why can't I imagine it at all? What would I believe if I didn't believe that? So far I have no system at all within which this doubt might exist.

In the above paragraphs we have seen that doubts presupposse a language game. When we introduce a doubt within a language game, it has sense. But if we try to construct a doubt out of the language game in which we are embedded, or if we try to build a doubt against the language game as a whole, then our doubt will lack any sense. Wittgenstein's argumentations show that any doubt presupposses the existence of something that cannot be doubt, that

is, doubts are possible only because certainty exists. The game of doubting presupposes certainty.

115: If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting presupposes certainty.

Thus we arrive to the end of Wittgenstein's critique of skepticism. The core of his argumentation lies in asking the following: What kind of doubts does the skeptic raise? To which extent is it valid to insert those doubts in the language game in which we live? His answer to these interrogants emphasizes that some aspects of our thoughts cannot be doubted, since they are what allow us to construct our thoughts themselves, included the very formulation of any doubt. Thus the analysis of the skeptical doubt, its premises and consequences, allows him to prove that any doubt presuposses the existence of a field of certainty and hence, that skepticism cannot be the last word.

Of course, Wittgenstein's acceptance of the existence of certainty, forces us to clarify what he understands under that term. We must then determine what field of reality corresponds to what we evaluate as certain. I will turn to this point now.

2. The field of certainty

Wittgenstein appeals to our common reaction against skeptical doubts to conclude that the skeptic's use of daily language is mistaken. We realize that something goes wrong with skeptical doubts when we are unable to sustain them. The skeptical doubt ceases to be meaningful to us as soon as we cannot back it anymore.

This remark involves a great discovery. At some point in the process of questioning whether a declaration is valid, we notice that we have touched ground. We find then that some propositions of our language stand so firmly in front of us that they are no longer questionable. [In the following, we will refer to this propositions as special or privileged propositions.]

341: That is to say, the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

The reason why there can be neither a doubt nor a proof of these special propositions, is that any question or argument we may try to develop, must start from the assumption of their validity. Thus any inquiry about the extension of our knowledge is built upon the validity of these special propositions, since everything we judge as knowledge presuposses them. To accept their validity is just the way we inquire about the limits of our knowledge.

It is important to stress that, according to Wittgenstein, these privileged propositions are not empirical. They lie at the foundations of our discourse and support all the other

propositions we utter. Hence they are not a result of an empirical investigation, but what backs up that very inquiry. This means that whilst any other empirical proposition measures its validity in relation to the privileged propositions, the latter do not require further justification to be sustained.

96: It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

253: At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded.

In effect, our language does not allow us neither to proof nor to review issues like, for example, the existence of our hands or of the earth. Since everytime we raise doubts about these facts "language goes on holiday", to use a metaphor of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1988, 38). In brief, the language game in which we are inmersed/plunged/embedded presupposses the existence of a set of propositions that are certain. This set of propositions govern our communicative practices as rules of discourse whose function is not so much to pass on information about the world as to organize our linguistic exchanges. In this sense, we can say that the special propositions we are talking about constitute the grammar of our language.

57: Now might not "I know, I am not just surmising, that here is my hand" be conceived as a proposition of grammar?

Well, to clearly understand the status of these privileged propositions, I would suggest that we turn to a clasification that appeared already in *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein distinguished then three types of propositions: meaningful (*sinnig*), nonsensical (*unsinnig*) and senseless (*sinnlos*). I think the distinction can be useful when applied to the special propositions we are talking about. Wittgenstein meets the sphere of certainty when he reflects about the conditions of intelligibility of some propositions. He then discovers that the same sentence can have different conditions of intelligibility, which depend on the context in which the sentence is uttered.
Thus whether a proposition like "I know this is a hand" makes sense or not, depends upon the circumstances in which it is pronounced. If we introduce this sentence in a daily conversation as an empirical observation -- for example, if a victim utters these words after opening a package containing a bomb --, then it will be meaningful (*sinnig*), and will have a truth value ascribed to it. However, if we pronounce the sentence "I know this is a hand" in a philosophical discussion and interpret it as if it were an empirical proposition -- as the skeptic does --, the proposition becomes a nonsense (*Unsinn*). Finally, if we use the sentence in the context of a philosophical discussion and we interpret it as a grammatical rule -- as Wittgenstein does --,

then it will lack any sense and will become senseless (*sinnlos*).

This comparision suggests that in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein constructs a tripartite classification of the sentences of our language as follows. First, sentences that are empirical, whose meaning and truth value depend upon the context in which we use them. That is the case of the sentence "I know this is a hand" when the victim pronounces it. Second, sentences that seem to be empirical but that, in certain contexts, become grammatical propositions. Such is the case of the above sentence when we introduce it in a discussion with the skeptic. Third, sentences which we may call philosophical that lack meaning under any circumstance. This is the case of a sentence like "There are physical objects".

The above distinctions about the way a sentence can have meaning or lack of it, play an important role in Wittgenstein's argument. Empirical propositions present no problem of interpretation when they are pronounced in the appropriate circumstances, since then they make all the sense. Philosophical sentences can also be straightforwardly evaluated, since according to Wittgenstein they are absurd in the sense specified. The real difficulty arises, however, in relation to the so-called grammatical propositions. To understand the way Wittgenstein solves the question about their role, we can draw a comparison between the role of grammatical propositions and the role of logical propositions.

In *Tractatus* Wittgenstein explained that logical propositions did not have sense. But in relation to them he introduced the important distinction between being nonsensical (*unsinnig*) and being senseless (*sinnlos*). Logical propositions are not absurd, but senseless, that is, they lack meaning at all. The assertion becomes clear when we remember Wittgenstein's definition of logical propositions as tautological (1987, 6.1) and certain (1987, 4.464). This description implies that nothing of what may happen in the world can ever affect them, neither to confirm nor to refute them (1987, 6.1222). For him logical propositions do not convey any information and say nothing (1987, 6.11).

We can now apply the definition of logical propositions to our understanding of the function of grammatical propositions in *On Certainty*. In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein invested logical propositions with ontological relevance when he made them the formal framework of the world. Given that they are certain and tautological, they lack semantic content and must be considered meaningless. In a similar way, in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein considers grammatical propositions as the sintactical skeleton of our language. Given that they also form a certain and unchangeable structure, they do not transmit any information either and must also be considered meaningless.

Nonetheless, we must be very careful at this point. All these reflections could make us believe that the role of grammatical propositions in *On Certainty* is very similar to the role that logical propositions played in a former period of Wittgenstein's intellectual development. However, we should not trust excesively in the advantages of this identification, since there are essential differences between both types of sentences. In my

opinion, these differences exhibit precisely to which extent the propositional treatment of the field of certainty poses insurmountable difficulties.

One of the differences is Wittgenstein's emphasis that the fact that grammatical propositions are certain, does not imply neither that they be true nor that they be false. This assertion implies that grammatical propositions are not tautologies in the sense in which logical propositions were. At the end of his life, Wittgenstein is convinced that a discussion about truth or falsehood does not fit in grammatical propositions. But, and this is my point, if we rule out the idea that grammatical propositions are true or false, it will not be possible to consider them "propositions" in a strict sense, since according to the classical definition a proposition is a linguistic expression that can bear a truth value.

A further point that should inspire us caution when comparing notions that belong to different periods of Wittgenstein's career, is the following. While logical propositions cannot be employed in the context of learning, some grammatical propositions can indeed be used to that purpose. Thus, while it does not make sense to tell a child "It rains or it does not rain", we can teach her something if we say "This is a hand". Before we have supposed that grammatical propositions are meaningless and do not convey any information. As we see it now, the role of these propositions is to rule our language games, that is, to establish the meaning of the set of propositions in our language. From this perspective, grammatical propositions do not lack sense or are meaningless, but they carry information about the way we use certain terms. Again, this difference points out to a key role of grammatical proposititions which does not fit well in their characterization as "propositions".

In effect, when Wittgenstein reflects upon the nature of the grammatical propositions, he realizes that what is truly important about them is not so much that they look like propositions, but that they contain the norms of our discourse and behaviour. We must therefore conclude that what we have called special propositions do not, in fact, belong to our language as an aditional element, but they are rather what hangs language together. This supports the idea that, in the final instance, Wittgenstein favored a non-propositional characterization of certainty.

It is at this stage that he appeals to a set of different phenomena that constitute the foundation of our thoughts, expressions and actions. He refers to them with different names like, for example, the inherited tradition, the community of origin, our behaviour, our animality, and even our mythology. All of which are non-intelectual phenomena that can perhaps be subsumed under the head of "facticity". Thus his inquiries led him to the verification of the existence of a sphere beyond language which includes an enormous variety of elements. Wittgenstein will use the term "certainty" to refer to that which backs all our thoughts, expressions and actions. The exploration of the rules of language refers us to a realm beyond language which can't be further analysed. The inquiry comes to an end when we understand

that the field of certainty exists and constitutes us, but that we cannot explicit its nature. At the end, what is certain and why it is certain, remains beyond our understanding.

3. Evaluation of the skeptical position

The conclusions we have reached above can guide us to understand Wittgenstein's answer to skepticism. As we have seen, Wittgenstein rejects the validity of the skeptical claim "I doubt whether the world exists because I don't know whether I am dreaming that the world exists". His argument shows that the skeptic's use of the terms "doubt", "know", "dream", and "world" is completely different from the normal use of the terms in the skeptic's community of origin. Wittgenstein's analysis reveals the extent to which the propositions that the skeptic tries to attack, function as certainties in our language. Through this criticism, Wittgenstein denies that an individual could state skeptical doubts about a particular use of language, since this use is legitimized by the community of speakers as a whole.

Wittgenstein's argument in this respect is impeccable, as has been emphasized by the secondary literature. As a result, it is generally believed that his linguistic analysis display that the skeptical challenge is no longer dangerous for epistemology. In my view, however, this conclusion is rather superficial and too optimistic, since Wittgenstein's approach to knowledge contains gaps which leave room for doubt. Wittgenstein suceeds in his *reductio ad absurdum* of skepticism when it is introduced at an individual level within daily practice. But it is less clear whether Wittgenstein's position can successfully confront a more severe type of skepticism. I mean the kind of skepticism which does not involve certain linguistic practices, but the system of language itself.

Wittgenstein discovered the importance of this second type of skepticism when he realized that the specificity of skepticism is not grasped when the skeptical attitude is described as a mere generalization of empirical doubt. On the contrary, the peculiarity of skepticism lies in the way it forces us to enquire about the rules of use of our language. This type of questioning about the use of language within a community appears, for example, when we ask ourselves how to identify the propositions that are certainties in that community. But despite his efforts to reject skepticism at this level, Wittgenstein was eventually obliged to admit that, in the final instance, it is impossible to identify these propositions.

The reason behind this conclusion is Wittgenstein's thesis that the same expression can have meaning in certain circumstances, whereas it has none in others. Thus it makes sense to say "I know that I have a hand" after opening a package containing a bomb, but most of the time the proposition "I have a hand" has an ascription of certainty. From this fact we can conclude that any questioning about whether a proposition is meaningful, about whether it can be known, and also about whether it is certain, demands further exploration of the circumstances in

which the proposition is uttered. Therefore, the problem that the thesis of the diversity of senses raises is how to know in which circumstances it is appropriate to inmerse in a lively discussion about the meaning of a proposition or about its description as certain or as knowledge.

Now, -- and this is a delicate point -- when we try to connect language games with the circumstances that <u>correspond to</u> them, a serious obstacle appears. The <u>setting</u> requires us to pay attention to the conditions of use of our sentences or, what is the same, to appeal to "normal circumstances" as the framework in which our declarations <u>fit</u>. At this point, however, Wittgenstein recognizes that we do not possess --and even more significantly, that we cannot possess -- any method to distinguish under which circumstances a declaration of knowledge or of certainty is correct.

27: If, however, one wanted to give something like a rule here, then it would contain the expression "in normal circumstances". And we recognize normal circumstances but cannot precisely describe them. At most, we can describe a range of abnormal ones.

The proposition itself does not tell us neither when its insertion in some contexts is pertinent, nor when it is superfluous. Besides, any rule we may conceive to determine the context of use will have, according to Wittgenstein, an open character. If the "normal circumstances" under which we may use our sentences cannot be specified, that is, if there are no rules to use our propositions, then it is not possible to identify which propositions are certain.
<u>(......)</u>

These considerations lead us to conclude that Wittgenstein's position cannot reject a type of skepticism whose objective is to warn us of the impossibility of understanding our own position in the world. This raises an interesting issue, that is, Wittgenstein's recognition of the limits of philosophical reflection. In this sense, one consequence of his analysis of epistemic terms is his thesis that it is impossible to justify the logic behind our language, and hence, we can only assume its facticity.

Now it is precisely on this issue that Wittgenstein gives the definite and certainly most polemical turn of the screw in his argumentation. He argues that the temptation to seek the foundations of our language games by looking for their finality or their essence, is mistaken. Linguistic analysis comes to an end when we recognize the existence of propositions that are certain. This means that it is not necessary to justify their certainty, on the contrary, it is sufficient to understand that they exist. In fact, this is the only movement which is valid philosophically. Ultimately, the idea that we cannot justify our system of meanings does not imply, according to Wittgenstein, that we can pose doubts about it. It makes no sense to think it might be false, in the same way that it makes no sense to think it might be true.

4. The limits of language and the philosophical task

   Wittgenstein's assertion that first philosophy or metaphysics is impossible, and that we do not need to worry about this fact, inspires two different considerations about the possibilities of success of global skepticism. On the one hand, one could consider that the substratum of certainty shapes us in such a way that we lack the necessary perspective to grasp it from the outside. This approach would define global skepticism as unintelligible because no skeptical doubt would be able to eliminate our certainties.

   On the other hand, one could consider that to suppose that there is an unattainable and unrefutable core of certainty implies, precisely, begging the question against skepticism. From this perspective, the postulation of a field of certainties would be a debatable strategy that cannot meet its objective of refuting skepticism.

   The above dilemma leaves us with the problem of deciding which of the two positions is correct. In my opinion, once we have arrived at this point, any decision we might make implies begging the question. In other words, the reasons behind our decision do not need to be accepted by the two parties involved, i.e., the skeptic and his opponent. Thus the playing field is no longer a rational discussion, but a sphere prior to it. In accordance with a recurrent feature of Wittgenstein's thought, one might venture the hypothesis that the nature of this problem is, in fact, ethical.

   To finish, I would like to highlight a feature that has traditionally defined the philosophical task, i.e., the fact that the philosopher sometimes asked without awaiting a response, or without aspiring to achieve it. In the eyes of the traditional epistemologist, the discussion about skepticism showed that the inquiry about knowledge was legitimate, even if there was no definite annswer to it. Wittgenstein belongs to that same tradition in which while the philosopher is well aware of the limits of human knowledge, he still takes seriously the possibility of inquiring. In relation to this point, we must recall the important category of nonsense (*unsinnig*) but valuable of *Tractatus*. The problem of skepticism belongs to the same field of reality as the mystical.

   In any case, Wittgenstein's discussion about skepticism shows, in my opinion, that philosophical questions are worth researching. Our last reaction may be silence but to arrive to this conclusion it is necessary to cover previously a long argumentative path.