

The Mean Relative to Us: Why Wittgenstein is Not a Relativist (with Occasional Reference to Aristotle)

As the title of this essay suggests I will be attempting to show that, though Wittgenstein's later work has been labeled relativist by both philosophical friends and foes alike¹, this label is not only misapplied to Wittgenstein, the labeling of Wittgenstein as a relativist is a symptom of the very philosophical ill that he labored to lay bare ('represent perspicuously'), so that it may be treated.² This labeling of Wittgenstein as a relativist is itself a continuation of a "craving for generality...the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case"(B.B., p. 18). That is, this essay is an attempt to take Wittgenstein at his word when he says that "we must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place" (P.I. 109), and that he is "assembling reminders for a particular purpose"(P.I. 127), as opposed to theorizing about language-games, frameworks, paradigms, conceptual schemes, cultures, practices, webs of beliefs *et al*, or reducing language (or, if this is different, its use) to any of these general concepts. As he says in *The Blue Book* "it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything"(B.B., p. 18).

The relativism with which Wittgenstein is most often associated tends to be of the cultural vein, the notion that the truth or falsity of our judgments is determined only from within – and only falls upon those within – some specific culture or practice. As Robert Kirk describes it in his *Relativism and Reality*:

People brought up in different cultures will speak different language-games, with different rules from ours. They think of the world from within their own language and culture; in some cases they have different interests and values, in which cases,

¹ Friends would include Rorty, Lyotard...and Foes would be Badiou, Christopher Norris (all) etc.

² I hesitate to put too much stress on Wittgenstein as being the one to provide the treatment, partly because the effectiveness of any medicine is largely dependent upon the one receiving the treatment. As Wittgenstein says in the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*: "I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own"(vi). He can't "go the bloody hard way" for us. To put this a slightly different way: the sickness concerning Wittgenstein is not just of the intellect (not just clearing up confusions), but of the will. Or yet again: the clearing up of philosophical confusions requires more of a person than linguistic correctness.

their culture leads them to direct their attention to different sorts of things from those salient in our culture. It is not as if the rules of our language-game were written in the book of nature. On the contrary, they are fixed by the custom and practice of communities in definite historical and social situations. (1999, 98)

It is clear that this description of our human condition has been written after an encounter of the later writings of Wittgenstein³, which can be gleaned from the use of the terms “rules” and “language-games”; but it should be just as clear that this description is *entirely* at odds with the way that Wittgenstein characterized his own later work. This relativistic description of our relation to each other – and the role that language plays in that relation – sounds not only like an extremely generalized hypothesis (both of which Wittgenstein considered to be plaguing philosophy: generalization and philosophy as the forming and testing of hypotheses), but it also smacks of dualism. According to Kirk’s description above we (who is all included in this “we”?) are *inside* our culture, and it sounds like we are stuck there (or is it here?), while others (who are they? *Is there a they?*) are in the same predicament within their culture. Language here is not a means of communication, it is the very thing that prevents it! Further, it is a much recited phrase within Wittgensteinian scholarship that he characterized his philosophy as “show[ing] the fly the way out of the bottle”(P.I. 309), but according to Kirk’s description it’s as if Wittgenstein let the fly out of the bottle, but the fly turned into a beetle and is now stuck in a cultural box⁴! If this is Wittgenstein’s legacy – that one is either fluttering around aimlessly in a philosophical bottle or caged within a culture, then how would one choose, how could the choice be anything but arbitrary? However, I aim to show that this predicament is not due to an inconsistency in Wittgenstein, but a failure upon (some of) his readers to take heed of his reminders.

³ I hesitate to say “reading” of them.

⁴ And we should remember that it may not be all that strange that this fly should turn into a beetle, because the word “beetle” here is very indeterminate, as it can refer to a something, nothing at all, or to something constantly changing (*cf.* P.I. 293).

To help get a more perspicuous view of the “moral” import of this relativism I will occasionally be referring to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, because I think (and hope to show) that there are some important though oft neglected affinities between Aristotle’s discussions of the relationship between ethics and the development of moral character, and the philosophy found in Wittgenstein’s writings from *The Blue Book* on. So I should probably address the following concern from the get-go. I anticipate something like this: “How could it possibly be in the spirit of Wittgenstein to make reference to Aristotle (a philosopher he had apparently never read)? Wasn’t his aim to put an end to philosophizing, not go back to its beginnings? And isn’t it well known to his readers that he had at one time intended to use as a motto for his *Philosophical Investigations* a quote from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, ‘I will teach you differences’(Monk). Is this not ‘teaching similarities’?” But Wittgenstein is certainly not categorically opposed to presenting similarities. What he could be said to be categorically opposed to is philosophical confusion, and to alleviate this he himself often demonstrates what he calls “family resemblances”, and if I am reading Wittgenstein and Aristotle right, this is something that they share (call it a friendly resemblance).

A good place to start, I think, is with Wittgenstein’s reflections on James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, in which Frazer attempts to provide a modern, “dispassionate” *explanation* of religious and ritualistic human actions in order to show that there is a progression in our beliefs, thoughts and actions, from magic, through religion to science: “The dispassionate observer”, says Frazer, “whose studies have led him to plumb its depths, can hardly regard it otherwise than as a standing menace to civilization”. That is, this progression from magic, through religion, to science, for Frazer, is a progression from the primitive to the civilized.

To those considering Wittgenstein to be a relativist (whether friend or foe), these reflections pose a peculiar problem, because in them Wittgenstein is especially critical of Frazer's attempts at dispassionately explaining the rituals of these so-called primitive people – *not* because these rituals function in a culture distinct from that of Frazer (which they certainly do) – but because they are *in fact* a misunderstanding of these rituals, and this misunderstanding, according to Wittgenstein, is not due to an incommensurability between two⁵ distinct cultures, but due to a failing on Frazer's part to *correctly* acknowledge the role these rituals play in the lives of those he is “dispassionately observing.” That is, Wittgenstein is not saying “One will ‘always already’ fail in one's attempts to explain or judge the activities of another culture according to the standards of one's own culture” (*a la* relativism), he's trying to show that the very attempt by Frazer to provide an explanation of these rituals is itself an expression/indication of a misunderstanding on Frazer's part: “I believe that the attempt to explain is already therefore wrong, because one must only correctly piece together what one *knows*, without adding anything, and the satisfaction being sought through the explanation follows of itself” (P.O., 119). What Frazer is “adding” to his explanation, according to Wittgenstein, is a description of these rituals as being quasi-scientific, that, for instance, the burning of an effigy or kissing the picture of one's beloved is done *because* it is believed to be a *cause* giving rise to a specific *effect*. Wittgenstein does not deny that there are people that do this (that there are people that “interpret magic scientifically”),⁶ he's saying that this is not the role that the rituals play in the lives of the people Frazer is observing⁷: “Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of one's beloved. That is

⁵ Or should we say three (1. Frazer's, 2. The “primitive” people's & 3. Wittgenstein's)? This, of course, would only make the job of showing Wittgenstein to be a relativist that much more difficult.

⁶ For example, legitimately believe that the socks one wears during a baseball game has a causal relation to the outcome of one's performance during the game.

⁷ It is also interesting to point out that Frazer never “observed” any of the cultures discussed in his *Golden Bough*; he's what one might call an arm-chair anthropologist. However, the fault that Wittgenstein finds in Frazer is not

obviously not based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents... The same savage, who stabs the picture of his enemy apparently in order to kill him, really builds his hut out of wood and carves his arrow skillfully and not in effigy.”

Frazer is *assuming* that the activities of burning an effigy or kissing the picture of one’s beloved are based on the belief (or opinion) that the performance of these actions have a cause and effect relationship, but the fact that these so-called “savages” build huts and carve arrows just as we do, should show that these rituals play a different role in these people’s lives. That is, when Wittgenstein criticizes Frazer by pointing out that “no *opinion* serves as the foundation for a religious symbol...and only an opinion can involve an error”, he is not (*a la* relativism) criticizing Frazer’s thought that modern science is better than the science of these primitive people, he’s criticizing Frazer for *wrongly* conceiving of these primitive ritual activities as at all scientific: “...All that Frazer does is to make them plausible to people who think as he does. It is very remarkable that in the final analysis all these practices are presented as, so to speak, pieces of stupidity. But it will never be plausible to say that mankind does all that out of sheer stupidity.” (P.O., 119). In short, if there is a flawed hypothesis here, according to Wittgenstein, it is not that of the “savages” (because, as of yet, we have not mentioned any of their hypotheses), it is Frazer’s.

If Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Frazer were that he is overstepping his culturally determined bounds in trying to apply his culturally fixed standards to the practices of a different culture, then they would indeed be criticisms of a relativist vein; and, given that Wittgenstein is of a different culture than that of Frazer (clearly associating Frazer here with the scientific

that he never encountered any of these people, it’s that he thought what was needed in order to understand them was “observation” of them.

“darkness of this time” (P.I., vi)), they would be as self-contradictory as any other formulation of relativism. But his criticisms are that Frazer, in his attempts to provide an explanation of certain ritual activities of these so-called primitive people, demonstrates a misunderstanding of the role that these rituals play in their lives, and it is this misunderstanding that allows for Frazer’s judgment of *his* (civilized) culture being superior. It is not that cross-cultural judgments are somehow impossible⁸, it’s that *this* judgment, *Frazer’s* judgment, is based on a misunderstanding. Should Frazer pay closer attention to the particular way that these rituals weave into the lives of these people, he wouldn’t be tempted (i.e. feel as a need) to formulate a hypothesis of a supposed similarity – that they, too, are doing science, just of an inferior sort – in order to make them intelligible to himself and his scientific, industrially civilized culture; rather, by paying attention to the particulars it is revealed, according to Wittgenstein, just how truly similar to *us* they really are. This is, I think, what Wittgenstein is getting at when he says:

One could begin a book on anthropology by saying: When one examines the life and behavior of mankind throughout the world, one sees that, except for what might be called animal activities, such as ingestion, etc., etc., etc., men also perform actions which bear a characteristic peculiar to themselves, and these could be called ritualistic actions...But then it is nonsense for one to go on to say that the characteristic feature of *these* actions is the fact that they arise from faulty views about the physics of things. (Frazer does this when he says that magic is essentially false physics or, as the case may be, false medicine, technology, etc.) Rather, the characteristic feature of ritualistic action is not at all a view, an opinion, whether true or false, although an opinion—a belief—can itself be ritualistic or part of a rite.⁹

Wittgenstein is not saying that all of man’s actions (other than ingestion, etc.) are ritualistic, he’s saying that were there such a book, this book would contain *descriptions* of human activities, and the “characteristic features” of these activities – those features that were meant to be provided by

⁸ Whatever “possible” might mean here.

⁹ P.O. 129

a further explanation – would be revealed in the descriptions themselves.¹⁰ Put another way, the significance of these rituals, for instance, rituals concerning birth and fertility, rebirth, is not further illuminated by trying to explain their significance as being the *cause* of some further, fertile *effect*; according to Wittgenstein, one would be more puzzled at looking into another culture (regardless of how objectively and dispassionately), and *not* finding rituals surrounding birth and fertility and the dread of death (ibid., 121). So, when Wittgenstein goes on to say: “here one can only *describe* and say: this is what human life is like” (121), it does (I will admit) sound like he is expressing some kind of logical impossibility or human incapability, but if my reading of him thus far is correct, then he’s not expressing an impossibility or incapability, he’s expressing a human commonality: birth, fertility, life, death just are those things that *we as humans* treat ritualistically, treat as sacred, wonderful, awesome. To ask why (as Frazer does) would be a misunderstanding of them and their role in our lives.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle tries to stave off similar misunderstanding concerning human action as such and the development of certain characteristics,¹¹ and he does so, I think, in a similarly descriptive way. In *NE* we get a description of ourselves as richly complex beings. As individuals we are beings with many capabilities and many desires, some desires of which are to actualize (at least some of) our many capabilities. But Aristotle goes further in reminding us that we are not just individuals, we are social and political beings (*NE* 1097b10, *Politics* 1253a35), that we are *always already* beings that stand in important relations to others, important in the sense that to neglect these relations would not only be detrimental to their (and our) wellbeing, but would also be either a misunderstanding of or *disregard for* what a

¹⁰ It’s not just that an explanation of these ritualistic activities would be superfluous, it’s that an explanation is the *wrong* thing for understanding our interest in and concern for these activities (e.g. their burning of an effigy and my kissing my wife goodbye every morning).

¹¹ i.e. the virtues.

human being is. For instance, my very being is itself an indication that I am a son, not just that I am an individual, but that I am an individual within a parent-child relationship, and to neglect this would not only put a strain upon that relationship, but would either be a misunderstanding of or *disregard for* what I am as a human being. It is important to note that the same could be said should I either fail to acknowledge or disregard this fact about others (e.g. that they are someone's son, or daughter, mother, brother etc.).

For Aristotle, however, there is only a certain *kind* of misunderstanding that is possible here (or in Wittgensteinian terms, only a certain kind of misunderstanding that makes sense). In Book III, while discussing the distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions, Aristotle gives two ways in which acts are described as involuntary: when they are “done under constraint” or when they are “due to ignorance”. Voluntary actions are those of which one is not only fully aware, but fully in control, while involuntary actions are those of which one is either not fully in control (those done “under constraint”), or not fully aware (those “due to ignorance”). Aristotle goes on to make a further distinction between those acts in which ignorance is involved: “there also seems to be a difference between actions *due to* ignorance and acting *in* ignorance. A man's action is not considered to be due to ignorance when he is drunk or angry, but due to intoxication and anger, although he does not know what he is doing and is in fact acting in ignorance”(1110b25). However, it should be noted (and Aristotle does note it), that in both instances of ignorance, what one is ignorant of are particulars. To use Aristotle's example, Aeschylus had been accused of betraying the trust of a group into which he had been initiated by divulging its “secrets”, but this wasn't out of a disregard for the role that trust and loyalty play in our lives, he just didn't know that he wasn't supposed to tell anybody what went on behind those closed doors. After having this matter cleared up, should Aeschylus have a little

too much to drink some night and on his way home recite the secret creeds a little too loudly, this need not be described as Aeschylus betraying his friends' trust; his fault here is not disloyalty, it's lack of self-control. Or, if we are to say that Aeschylus is betraying his friends' trust, it is not because his friends' trust means nothing to him, it is because he is unable to control his sensual desires (any pub is proof that drinking too much affects the volume level of one's voice).

However, there is a claim to ignorance that Aristotle is not willing to allow as a possibility for correctly describing one's actions. He says:

[A]n act can hardly be called involuntary if the agent is ignorant of what is beneficial. Ignorance in moral choice does not make an act involuntary—it makes it wicked; nor does ignorance of the universal, for that invites reproach; rather, it is ignorance of the particulars which constitute the circumstances and the issues involved in the action (1110b30).

If I am understanding him correctly, he is saying that, for instance, should Aeschylus divulge his friends' secrets yet, upon accusation, claim ignorance of the impropriety of telling friends' secrets or claim ignorance of the harm that disloyalty brings upon one's friends, this is not correctly described as ignorance, as this is not a lack of certain *information*; if it is a lacking, it is a lacking of an entirely different sort. Further, if what is being claimed here is some kind of understanding of what being disloyal to one's friend is, and yet *not* conceiving of it *as* a harm, *as* wrong, then one is not just claiming ignorance of the concept "disloyalty" (or "loyalty"), one is claiming ignorance of what it is to be a friend, and this, says Aristotle, "invites reproach". That is, should Aristotle accept this as a possible description of one's actions, then what is being allowed for is the possibility that one can have an understanding of what being disloyal to one's friend is and yet not conceive of it *as* a harm, *as* wrong. But what could this understanding of disloyalty consist in? What could one *mean* by "disloyalty" yet not conceive of it as wrong?

Aristotle, if I am reading him correctly, says: “Nothing.” This could only show a blatant disregard for the other *as a friend*, or, wickedness.

Wittgenstein might say here that what Aristotle is doing is bringing the words “loyalty” and “friend” “back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (*P.I.* 116). Though he would hesitate to call it wickedness, it would not be because he is more sensitive to such an account of one’s actions, but because the only people that seem to be giving such accounts are philosophers. When people are reproached for divulging secrets (or being disloyal in general), their response may be that they were unaware that what they were doing was divulging a secret (that what they were saying would be correctly described as a secret), or they may say that they didn’t know that anyone was around to hear them (that what they were doing would be correctly described as divulging). After being made aware of this information they will acknowledge that what they have done is a harm and be remorseful. Of course, it is always possible that after being made aware of this information that one is not in the least remorseful. But this lack of remorse is not due to an understanding of disloyalty as something that is not wrong, it’s due to a disregard or indifference towards the way that his or her actions are affecting others. This is not a lack of *information*, it’s a lack of *caring*.

Therefore, when the relativist wants to say that it is only from within one’s own culture (or language-game etc.) that the wrongness of, say, disloyalty is determined, this assumes that one could, at least, make sense of the concept of “disloyalty” without conceiving of it as a harm, that demonstrating that an action is disloyal is one thing, demonstrating that it is wrong is quite another; but it isn’t at all clear what a notion of un-harmful “disloyalty” would be, let alone what it would mean to show that disloyalty is, in fact, harmful. And that such conceptions and

supposed demonstrations are harmful to ethical discussions both Aristotle and Wittgenstein would agree. “Back to the rough ground!”