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Wittgensteinian Philosophy, Anthropology and the Ethics of Psychiatry

- Hadas Gabizon-David

Centre for Asian and International Bioethics, Faculty of Health Sciences, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel

Email: gabizon@bgumail.bgu.ac.il

- Frank J. Leavitt,

Centre for Asian and International Bioethics,, Faculty of Health Sciences, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel.

Email: yeruham@bgumail.bgu.ac.il

Introduction

Discussions of the philosophical base of bioethics too often concentrate on philosophical ethics: utilitarianism, deontology, teleology, Aristotelianism, etc. This approach is too narrow.

Science, philosophy of science, philosophy of logic and language, metaphysics, deeply influenced the ethical philosophies of the great philosophers of the past.

If they were right in putting ethics at the crown of their edifices, and if this is what gave their ethics substance and depth, then perhaps our bioethics, too, must grow out of substantive enquiries into the nature of life, existence, language, logic and science: especially of the health and life sciences. As one example of how this might be done, we want to try to put this ideal into effect by developing an outline of a Wittgensteinian bioethic of psychiatry. We do not intend to create ethics incestuously out of ethics. But we shall start with substantive enquiries into fundamental concepts in Wittgenstein's philosophy.

The philosophy in this paper will not, however, be *Wittgenstein's*. But we hope it will be *Wittgensteinian*. Rather than aiming at historical accuracy about every detail of Wittgenstein's own opinions we shall attempt to draw logical conclusions from some of his doctrines as we understand them.

We shall not try to guess at the bioethic of psychiatry which Wittgenstein "might have written", but rather suggest and discuss a bioethic of psychiatry which is inspired by Wittgenstein's philosophy. First, however, let us clarify further what we mean by saying that ethics develops out of substantive enquiry.

We shall use two examples from the history of philosophy: Hume and Aristotle.

David Hume was highly inspired, as we see in the preface to his *Treatise of Human Nature*, by Newton's success in applying empirical methods to natural philosophy, to what we today call "physics". Hume subtitled his *Treatise*: "an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects. He then devoted the first book of his *Treatise* to substantive philosophy, i.e., epistemology, ontology and philosophy of mind, in which he took the stand that all that can be known to us are impressions and ideas. It naturally follows that an enquiry into ethics can only be based upon an empirical study of the laws of interplay of impressions and ideas within the mind, because impressions and ideas are the only data available to us on which any enquiry, including ethical enquiry, can be based.

In Hume's philosophy ethical praise and blame are passions, i.e. a certain kind of impression. So, ethics has to be a study of impressions. He therefore devoted the second book of his *Treatise* to an experimental and highly introspective study of causal laws governing the passions.

This is part of what is today called "psychology", which is often considered a science. He then applied these doctrines, in

the third book of his *Treatise*, to ethics, in a series of empirical generalizations about the etiology of moral praise and moral blame. The ethics was not generated from ethics but directly from epistemology and psychology.

Another example is Aristotle, whose study of scientific method in the *Posterior Analytics* -- with special attention to the geometry which was developing just before Euclid -- lead to the concept of *anichnoya*, the mysterious faculty of "quick wit" or intuitive grasp of the cause of a phenomenon or the explanation of a mathematical proposition.

This mysterious purely intellectual faculty reappeared in the *De Anima* as the "agent intellect" which grasps the explanations of things. (1)

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* this faculty becomes that which distinguishes us from the animals, makes us most similar to and loved by the gods, and the exercise of which is essential to an ethical life.

We think that what we said about Hume and Aristotle can be generalized and that all serious philosophical ethics is based on substantive philosophy, which in turn is, when serious, inspired by the science of the day. But in the interests of brevity, we shall not develop this point with respect to other philosophers of the past.

We shall now turn to Wittgenstein, and to the biomedical sciences which are, in our generation, the "science of the day" just as physics was in Hume's time. The philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein was highly influential in Anglophonic and European philosophy in the mid twentieth century.

Some aspects of the Wittgensteinian movement were, more over, typical to the times and similar to movements in other fields, including cultural relativism in anthropology as can be seen in the controversies surrounding Winch's writings, and including, as we shall see, the anti-psychiatry movement in psychiatry. We shall present an admittedly oversimplified and abbreviated statement of some core points in Wittgenstein's philosophy.

Wittgenstein's philosophy is enormously complex and disorderly, made of a vast number of scattered jottings, remarks and students' lecture notes. There are many different schools of interpretation.

Rather than attempting a scholarly interpretation of his philosophy we shall state a relatively workable Wittgensteinian doctrine as a basis for developing bioethical consequences, particularly in the ethics of psychiatry.

We shall discuss four core ideas: the idea of "meaning as use", the idea of a "language game", the connexion between "language and "forms of life", and the well-known Wittgensteinian doctrine that "there can be no private language".

I) Meaning as use: Wittgenstein's philosophy of language stands in opposition to the Platonist semantics which ruled in philosophy for many years.

According to Platonist semantics words indicate absolute ideas. The word "good", for example stands for absolute goodness, and things are judged to be good or not-good as they are near to or distant from this absolute standard. According to Wittgensteinian philosophy, on the other hand, words do not represent ideas but are rather like pieces in a game which are used in various ways to accomplish various things in our lives, like expressing our feelings for example.

Words have no permanent, fixed semantic meanings over and above their uses within specific contexts, such as for example, emotional, inter-personal or cultural contexts.

But to appreciate the implications of this doctrine of meaning for psychiatric ethics, we must first discuss the idea of language games.

II) Language Games: Just as pieces in chess and balls in football are said to be correctly used if they are used according to rules which constitute their functions in these games, so

words of different languages are used according to rules which constitute those languages.

Wittgenstein, however, thought of us as playing various "games" with words. When the word *dog*, for example is used in the "game" of classifying animals into genus and species, it has one use. But when it is used in the "game" of cursing, calling someone a *dog*, it has an entirely different use. If someone curses you by calling you a dog, it would be inappropriate to reply by saying: "But I am not a four-legged mammal". Just as you cannot use a football in a game of tennis, so words in one language game may have entirely different uses within another language game.

An obvious consequence is the cultural relativism which was debated at length by philosophers like Winch and Jarvie and in Elazar Weinryb's Hebrew writings, where attention was given to cultural relativity with respect to scientificity and rationality.

But our concern is bioethics. A clear consequence of the doctrine of language games, which is inseparable from the doctrine of meaning as use, is that ethical words like "good", "bad", "deviant", "cruel" are used according to rules which are determined by a socio-cultural context, and which will be different from culture to culture, and -- perhaps no less so (as was suggested by the International Bioethics Survey (2) -- within each culture.

It follows that there is no universal ethics because uses of ethical words will vary both inter culturally and intra culturally.

Just as you can not judge a move in basketball according to the rules of football, so there can be no basis for members of one culture to judge uses of evaluative words --and their consequences in action -- in foreign cultures. Nor can two people within the same culture always judge the use of evaluative words by others within the same culture.

Perhaps there are consequences for psychiatric ethics. Can't we say that the so-called "mentally ill" are really a culture or sub-culture in-and-of themselves, with their own language games, their own rules for using words: especially in ethical judgments where one decides whether actions are right or wrong? If so then the so-called "mentally ill" are not deviant but only culturally different. They deserve the same respect which we owe to any minority culture.

By this is not meant "toleration", because to tolerate someone is to stoop down to do that persona favour. But according to the conclusion which we are considering, the so-called "mentally ill" are fully equal to everyone else. It would make as much sense to ask them to tolerate us as it would to ask us to tolerate them.

The similarity to doctrines of Szasz, Laing and Foucault should not be surprising. There seems to have been a spirit of the times. But does it really make sense to call the mentally ill a culture or sub-culture? It has been objected to us: "Of course if the so-called 'mentally ill' form a radically different culture, we do not understand them, and if we do not understand their language at all, we simply cannot evaluate them. But if we can call some people 'mentally ill', this shows that they are not totally severed from us, and mentally ill or not, we can evaluate agents [who are] different from us in some respects but [who are] in agreement in... [other respects]."

"(Anonymous referee).

This is a challenging objection: If they are totally severed from us then it seems that we cannot evaluate them, even to the extent of saying that they deserve respect. But if we can understand them, if only just to the extent that we know that they are thinking beings different from us, then why cannot we evaluate them? In reply, and in continuation of our attempt to develop a "Wittgensteinian" doctrine, we suggest that where the sets of evaluative concepts used by two cultures (or sub-cultures) overlap, then members of one culture may evaluate members of the other with respect to the use of these concepts. But where the sets of concepts don't overlap there can be no evaluation. For example, suppose a person points

to a man and says: "This man is very fat, and all very fat people are possessed by evil spirits and ought to be exorcised."

There are two judgments here:

1. "This man is very fat",
2. "All very fat people are possessed by evil spirits and ought to be exorcised".

If we use the word "fat" in the same way as this person, we may evaluate the first judgment and say: "You think this guy is fat? You should have seen the guy I saw in the Savoy Truffle Restaurant yesterday." But if our own uses of the terms: "evil", "spirit", "ought" and "exorcised" are different from his uses, then we cannot evaluate the second judgment. The common store of concepts, the intersection of the sets of our concepts and theirs, would be the basis of our moral respect for so-called mentally ill people. But more on the idea of respect will be said when we come to discuss private languages below.

First, however, another problem must be discussed. Factually speaking, does it really make sense to say that the mentally ill form a culture in the sense of having a stock of concepts, patterns of thinking and behaving which unite them with one another and separate them from others? Further, is there any such thing as a community among them, with such features as solidarity or mutual loyalty? This is a big question to which an answer cannot be given without going far beyond the scope of this paper.

Perhaps sufferers of a common psychiatric illness or syndrome, like schizophrenia or manic-depression do share a common set of concepts and patterns of thinking and behaving. Otherwise we wouldn't identify them as suffering from the same psychiatric syndrome. There would be no way to identify their syndrome. But do they form a community in the sense of having loyalty to one another? Or in the sense of really communicating with one another? Perhaps they do so in the sense of being part of a segment of the population who are different from others and therefore may feel discriminated-against.

But then they might share this communality with other mentally-ill people who do not share any unique patterns of thinking with them.

Again can we possibly say that psychopathic murderers and pedophiles, on the one hand, form any community with mild and basically decent people who have a tendency to deep depression? Rather than speaking about *the* community of the mentally ill, we should speak instead of subsets of the set of the mentally ill, communities of mentally ill who are sufficiently similar to form a culture.

This line of thinking is leading to the idea of a kind of communities constituted by Wittgensteinian "family resemblances", with members sharing some things, and not others, with various other members. But further enquiry into this point would require extensive empirical research into what really goes on within groups of mentally-ill people. And that is beyond the scope of this paper.

III) Language is a Form of Life: By "language" is not meant Hebrew or Tamil or Japanese, but rather subtle rules for the uses of words. In the present context we are interested especially in evaluative words like "rational", "scientific", "good", "ugly" etc.

Wittgenstein may not have said: "Language is a form of life" in these exact words.

But he said enough similar things --like: "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life"(3) that we may take this saying to represent his view. This famous but obscure idea, that "language is a form of life", is open to a number of interpretations.

One way to understand the phrase is that a language, i.e., a set of rules for uses of words, determines a way of living, which determines a culture, which determines the ethical values of the members of that culture. We think that many Wittgensteinian scholars would understand it this way. But

another way to take the phrase would be that instead of saying that a language is the basic factor from which everything else results (like Wittgenstein's students seem to have thought) we shall consider the idea that our language and patterns of behavior, which themselves determine ethical values, are themselves functions of something more basic: our genetic inheritance together with our environment.

Stated a little simplistically, this doctrine would say that the genome of individuals or a group, together with the environment, determines a language (in the normative sense of "language" discussed above) together with patterns of behavior. Our languages together with our patterns of behavior determine the language games which constitute our ethical perceptions of right and wrong. The growing body of genetic research suggesting a significant genetic factor in determining personality traits led us to this suggestion. And of course personality traits can lead to values. Obviously environment has a role, but a biological basis seems definitely to exist. And a biological compatibility among individuals might lead to a community with a shared ethic.

And if such an ethic deviates from what we personally believe to be right or wrong, it would seem that we should treat it nonetheless with respect because it results from genetic and environmental factors which are beyond human control. Similar conclusions apply of course to communities of the so-called mentally ill.

An anonymous referee has objected to our suggestions that a Wittgensteinian bioethic would ascribe a biological basis to language, culture and ethics, and biological bases for differences among people and cultures. According to the objection, Wittgenstein would rather ascribe similarities to biology while ascribing differences to historical and anthropological factors.

This kind of interpretation seems to be quite standard. For example H-J Glock, discussing: "Wittgenstein's claim that he provides 'remarks on the natural history of human beings' (Ref (3) Section 415) " wrote that: "Wittgenstein's naturalism is anthropological rather than biological".(4)

The problem, however, is that when studying a German-speaking philosopher who developed his philosophy during the first half of the 20th century, we cannot ignore the possibility that his thought might have developed to some extent out of the scientific-cultural milieu of the time when anthropology in Germany was inseparable from biology and what they used to call "race science".

Indeed when one reads Wittgenstein's remarks collected in the book, *Culture and Value* (5) it is hard to escape the feeling that one is reading a eugenic polemic. Wittgenstein, among other things, refers to the "unpoetic mentality" of the "Semitic races". He says: "If Jews are said not to have any sense of property, that may be compatible with their liking to be rich since for them money is a particular sort of power, not property." He refers to the Jews' "secretive and cunning nature." He refers to the Jews as a "sort of disease" a "tumour" in European history. (Ref (3) 6, 21, 22.)

There has been an attempt to explain away Wittgenstein's anti-Semitic remarks by suggesting that he wasn't writing against real Jews; he was only writing against a "metaphysical species" (6) But the phrase, "metaphysical species" is not in our opinion clear enough to make it possible for us to investigate this suggestion.

And this is not the place for detailed research into Wittgenstein's anti-Semitic remarks. (See however the note appended to reference (6) at end of paper.) But it seems to us that if such a study were to take these remarks at face value then it would be natural to understand Wittgenstein to be a believer in Third Reich "race-science", especially with respect to the idea that biology, through the genes, determines the mentality and ethics of a group of people. But if "mentality" is determined by "language", in Wittgenstein's philosophical

sense of "language", then our biological interpretation of "language as a form of life" seems to follow naturally.

As Israelis we would have preferred not to go into such an emotion-charged subject as Third Reich science. We certainly are not asking for the sympathy which mention of this subject often provokes when Israelis are present at international conferences. But Wittgenstein's racial remarks in *Culture and Value* make it impossible to avoid this subject in any study of his philosophy. We must also emphasize that in suggesting possible points of similarity between Wittgenstein's philosophy and Third Reich racial science we, while obviously not unaware of the evils of the Third Reich, are not saying that everything in their science was wrong and evil. There has not yet been carried out sufficient historical scholarship to allow us to decide how much of German biology in the 1930's and early 1940's was evil nonsense, and how much of it was genuine science and an integral part of the process leading to today's genetic medicine.

In suggesting, therefore, a similarity between Wittgenstein's doctrine of language as a form of life and the German biology of his times, we are simply pointing to one aspect of his doctrine, and not necessarily saying that all aspects of Wittgenstein's doctrine were evil or Nazi. But Wittgenstein's anti-Semitism seems to go deep enough to suggest a serious connection between his concept of a form of life and racist ideas. But there is another serious problem with this philosophy as we shall see in the next section.

IV) There can be no Private Language: This Wittgensteinian slogan is also obscure and many attempts have been made to interpret it. Wittgenstein especially thought that our ability to discuss our feelings and emotions depends upon our being members of a community with shared assumptions as to the use of language. Similarly the Wittgensteinian assumptions which we are exploring would suggest that an individual who idiosyncratically evaluates the world in a way incomprehensible to others is not really evaluating the world, but simply talking nonsense.

This is because values are inseparable from the uses of evaluative words in a language and a language is a communal entity. But although we have been all along using the phrase "the community of the so-called mentally ill", we wonder how many mental patients really communicate with one another.

Are not some of them in a world of their own? And if they are in worlds of their own their linguistic and other behavior would not be worthy of the respect which is due to minority tribes and communities.

For if they are not really communicating with one another then there is no such community and a strict Wittgensteinian would conclude that there is no room to respect their moral judgments because they are just talking nonsense. As has been pointed out to us (anonymous referee), however, if we cannot understand what mental patients are saying to one another, then we have no basis for the conclusion that they are talking nonsense. It seems that we have to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that there may be some sense there -- perhaps a profound sense -- which is beyond our capacity to understand. This does not mean, of course, that they do not need our help and professional care. Without this care life for them and others can be quite dangerous or at least miserable.

The situation is similar to patients in the persistent vegetative state. We have no evidence of consciousness. But we also have no evidence that they are not conscious, that there are not thoughts and feelings and experiences going on inside and beyond our grasp. This uncertainty about what is going on inside is the basis for the human respect and dignity which has to be allowed these people.

In saying this we disagree with and depart from the Wittgensteinian philosophy, as well as all forms of philosophical and linguistic behaviorism, to which the idea of what is "going on inside" is a foreign and unacceptable idea. We, moreover,

recognize the strong genetic factor in both standard and non-standard emotion and behavior.

And we know that we too are also products of our genes and our environments. So even though we allow that society may have to protect itself by restraining the mentally unusual, we think they deserve the same love and respect as everybody else.

Summary and Conclusions

We tried to show in our Introduction that philosophical ethics has traditionally developed out of substantive enquiries, and not incestuously out of ethics. The body of our work was an example of how a Wittgensteinian ethic can be developed in just this way.

We have shown how the idea of *meaning as use*, leads to the concept of *language games* which are so-to-speak isolated from one another by the different rules which constitute them. This led us to the idea of different communities with cultures of their own. We therefore raised the question of whether the mentally ill may be regarded as a unique community and culture, or perhaps a unique set of communities. Wittgenstein's idea of language as a form of life led us to speculate about causes, perhaps genetic causes of differing languages and cultures. But we rejected the eugenic ideology which seems to be reflected in Wittgenstein's blatant anti-Semitic remarks. Nor can we agree with Wittgenstein's rejection of 'private languages', and we allow that individuals and small groups may have their unique ways of thinking, their own cultures.

According to the Wittgensteinian philosophy which we tried to develop here, it can be said that the so-called mentally ill form communities constituted by a kind of *family resemblance*. Although it would be hard to imagine psychopathic killers and pedophiles, on the one hand, forming any kind of community with mild and decent people who have a tendency to pathological depression, various subsets of the set of all mentally ill may be hypothesized to share a common language, which is due to patterns of behavior which they learned from their environment, and to their genetic inheritance. They may also share similar ethics which can be seen by their values and perceptions of right and wrong. This conclusion leads us to a recommendation about how to treat the mentally ill. We ought to enable them to develop closed communities instead of hospitalizing them. This does not mean that we should deny them medical treatment, or medical supervision. But we should encourage them to develop communities in and of themselves with rules of their own and values of their own: in other words, shared ethics. We might start by encouraging various moderate degrees of self-governance within mental institutions, and gradually work towards encouraging communities of the de-institutionalized mentally ill. But we shall have to develop the details of this proposal elsewhere. The purpose of this paper has only been to develop the philosophical basis.

Note

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Conflict of Interest

The authors confess to being human beings, sharing the vast majority of their DNA sequences with even the most seriously mentally ill. The authors' attempt to suggest a philosophical basis for respecting these patients' dignity was

motivated, therefore, by an interest which conflicts with the ideal of absolutely objective science and scholarship.

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- 6) Lurie Y. Jews as a metaphysical species. *Philosophy* (1989) 64: 323-347. One of the passages of which Lurie makes use in his attempt to excuse Wittgenstein's anti-Semitic remarks appears in the memoir written by Wittgenstein's student, Norman Malcolm (Malcolm N. *Ludwig Wittgenstein, a Memoir* (Oxford University Press, 1984, 30.) The passage reads: *One time...we saw a news vendor's sign which announced that the German government had accused the British government of instigating a recent attempt to assassinate Hitler with a bomb. This was in the autumn of 1939. Wittgenstein said of the German claim: 'It wouldn't surprise me if it were true.' I retorted that I couldn't believe that top people in the British government would do such a thing. I meant that the British were too civilized and decent to attempt anything so underhanded; and I added that such a deed was not in keeping with British 'national character'. My remark made Wittgenstein extremely angry. He considered it to be a great stupidity and also an indication that I was not learning anything from the philosophical training that he was trying to give me. He said these things very vehemently, and when I refused to admit that my remark was stupid he would not talk to me any more, and soon after we parted*

Lurie is not at all clear about how he expects such a passage to help him to excuse Wittgenstein's anti-Semitic remarks. In any case, the passage must be seen in its historical context. A reading of British newspapers of the time will reveal that the bomb attempt on Hitler's life was made after the European war had begun and it was known that the Germans had been sinking British merchant ships, and that they had already begun shipping many thousands of Jews "eastward". In such a context it is hard to conceive that any sane person could prefer the life of one mad leader over the lives of the countless soldiers, seamen and civilians who were dying because of that one leader. Yet Wittgenstein and Malcolm seem to have disagreed only on whether or not the British were capable of doing something "so underhanded". But they seem to have both agreed that the attack on Hitler's life was "underhanded". So it is hard to escape the conclusion that Wittgenstein and Malcolm both seem to have held Hitler in some esteem.

Three Dimensions of Contemporary Bioethics: Western, Global, Cosmist

- Konstantin S. Khroutski, M.D., Ph.D.

Institute of Medical Education, Novgorod State University after Yaroslav-the-Wise, Novgorod Velikiy, RUSSIA

Postal address: Dr. Konstantin S. Khroutski, Ph.D.; A/B 123, PO-25, IME NovSU, Novgorod Velikiy, 173025 Russia

E-mail: hrucki@mail.ru

Introduction

First of all, I would like to present the definition of the notion "episteme". The latter has been introduced by Michel Foucault in his work *The Order of Things* – to mean the regime of truth that underlay all the discourses of a particular epoch.