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Wittgenstein and Psychoanalysis: Philosophy as Therapy On Some Analogies Between Wittgenstein and Freud

Summary:

There are many ways of connecting Wittgenstein and Freud. The most obvious one being Wittgenstein's remarks on Freud. In what follows I will take a less known path and focus on the methodological affinities between Wittgenstein's philosophical practice and Freud's psychoanalysis. And I will do so by relying on the so called therapeutic turn of Wittgenstein, articulated by Stanley Cavell as well as by Cora Diamond and James Conant. The central claim of this line of interpretation consists in finding Wittgenstein's originality not so much in his philosophical arguments but – performatively – in the effects his philosophy is supposed to have on its readers. Philosophy is not seen as a constructive discipline that aims at accumulating and enlarging our acquired knowledge but as an activity whose success can be measured in the degree of transformation it allows its readers to achieve. Like in the case of psychoanalysis, for a change to be effective, it will have to be my change and not just the acceptance of an image someone imposes on me.

1.

There are many possible lines of connection between Wittgenstein and Freud. The most obvious one being Wittgenstein's remarks *on* Freud. I will here follow a secondary path and focus on the affinities between Wittgenstein's philosophical practice and Freud's psychoanalysis. It is in the light of this connection that Wittgenstein's statement about himself as a disciple of Freud makes sense (Rhees 1984, p. 123). In order to establish this methodological connection I will follow the so called therapeutic turn of Wittgenstein, articulated by Stanley Cavell (1979), Cora Diamond (1991) and James Conant (1991). The central claim of this line of interpretation consists in finding Wittgenstein's originality not so much in his philosophical arguments but – performatively – in the effects his philosophy is supposed to have on its readers. Not by chance Cavell calls philosophy “education for grown ups”, an activity aiming not at growth but at change or transformation (1979, p. 125).

2.

We can take the portrait of the philosopher, as depicted in the *Philosophical Investigations*, as our starting point. If there is such thing as a therapy (PI § 133), there must be a patient, someone who is ill, or perhaps better, since we are referring to cultural diseases, a subject distressed by anxieties and deep disquietudes. Wittgenstein's approach may be called therapeutic in as much as he does not aim at writing textbooks or

proposing philosophical thesis' (PI § 128). On the contrary, he considers the disposition to set up theories and explanations (imitating what the natural sciences do) a cultural disease of our time (OFM VI § 31). If we take with utmost seriousness Wittgenstein's declaration that he advances no theses in philosophy, we come to see his effort as a diagnostic one: the scope is not to solve philosophical puzzles (say, the 'problem' of other minds), suggesting an alternative, rival and more accurate way of approaching the issue (more accurate than the ones available attempts). Wittgenstein's scope is to understand how the existence of others can become a problem (for philosophers), helping us gain an understanding of the genesis of a problem and of the grip it has on our imagination. His interest focuses on the things we are induced to say/think when we are under the pressure of some philosophical perplexity (when we are held captive by certain philosophical pictures). A possible example is the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*. Although we may be tempted to consider it a text that deals with anthropological facts, it is significant that Wittgenstein focuses on our explanatory *prejudices* (our disposition to believe that – unusual human phenomena always have to be explained away). Even when discussing social phenomena such as the fire festivals, Wittgenstein refers not to the need to discover the causes that produce them but rather to the possibility of *calming down* the researcher. In this sense Wittgenstein hopes to cure us; us readers, us philosophers, helping us grasp some of the confusions we get entangled in.

3.

Wittgenstein presents the *Investigations* as a rhapsodic collection of different scenes. One of them is connected to ice and to the quest for crystalline purity (PI § 107, 108):

“(For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a result of investigation: it was a requirement.) The conflict now becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty.–We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction”

“The preconceived idea of crystalline purity can only be removed by turning our whole examination round...”

After having diagnosed this tendency towards the sublime (the anxious feeling that the rough ground of the everyday is limited and must be overcome to reach the pure essence of language), Wittgenstein invites us to acknowledge our tendency to avoid and elude the ordinary, pointing out at the same time the consequence of the temptation to think we must (and can) inhabit a medium different from everyday language: we land on slippery ice and we can barely move. Not being able to move is a negation of part of our natural history (PI § 25). Probably for this reason Wittgenstein concludes his illustration of the fantasy of exiting – of speaking outside – ordinary language with the following invitation: turn back to the rough ground (to the context of our actual needs). In the self-deceiving desire to speak outside language games, we empty our contribution to words – as though imagining and hoping to get something beyond us to take over our semantic responsibility (where precisely this very commitment to reveal something of ourselves, this personal responsibility in the shared nature of language is the only thing that gives our ordinary practices the strength that make them effective). We have frozen our responsiveness, alienating ourselves from our words. After all, if we are able to talk to (and with) each other it is not because language itself ensures a kind of mutuality, but because we retrospectively notice that there is a 'we'; that our shared concepts are still shared and hence really ours.

Whereas the young Wittgenstein was attracted by the crystalline purity of logic, the later Wittgenstein realizes that a world of ice – although perfect – is not habitable. Because of friction we trip and stumble in the attempt of adjusting to one another in a common life held in language, but after all it is thanks to such frictions that we can move and live a life at all.

Another scene of the *Investigations* is the one in which Wittgenstein urges us to bring the words back to their home (*Heimat*): what *we* do is bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use (PI § 116). How should we interpret this exhortation to bring words back home? Why do words get away from us? How are we to do that? And how do we know when the task has been achieved? Are we not always already at home? Then why, and how, should we get *back* home? More than a specific place, Wittgenstein seems to have a traffic or circulation in mind, as if words, like a currency, need to be exchangeable within a language. The circumstance that the life of words is to be found in everyday use does not mean that when doing philosophy words are ‘dead’; they are rather detached, as if exiled, vacant (like wheels turning idly they have gone dead because of our own withdrawal in using and meaning them). The home words are bound to – the attunement that represents the ordinary condition of doing and saying – has to be recovered or rediscovered and re-established. In portraying us as in danger of losing contact with the ordinary, these remarks become part of Wittgenstein’s representation of us as disoriented beings. It is up to us (to that side of ourselves that succumbs to theoretical temptations) to respond to that call. If it was not directed to us, the whole urgency of the call would sound artificial, as if it were the words’ fault (the words as such, independently of those using them). In this sense the re(dis)covery of ordinary language takes on a therapeutic value: it is we who have to come back, we have to rotate or turn our inquiry towards our actual needs (PI § 116). Only that way we can also cease to be out of touch and become able to return – and to realize that meaning and value ultimately rest on our expressing and responding, giving examples and correcting, explaining and glossing...

4.

Let’s now shift from these remarks on the content of the *Philosophical Investigations* to some comments upon its form. As Wittgenstein himself confesses, the *Investigations* are written by and are also about a person suffering from *beunruhigungen* or “deep disquietudes” (§ 111). Wittgenstein also refers to the pressure (*Drang*) that certain pictures have on us, pictures that “hold us captive” (§ 115). Expressions such as “I am inclined to say...”, “One is tempted to think...”, “Here the impulse is strong...” occur quite frequently. It is not implausible to suppose that Wittgenstein’s philosophical mission consists in indicating to what extent we fall victim of our theoretical temptations and *Denkneigungen*. This is precisely why ‘Working in philosophy ... is really more a working on oneself. On one’s own interpretation. On one’s own way of seeing things.’ [CV p. 16].

The very way the *Investigations* are written seem to presuppose a philosopher/reader subject to many temptations and in need to be cured (RFM, IV § 53). Philosophy is connected not to the passage from ignorance to knowledge (philosophy does not teach us anything *new*) but rather to the passage from being lost/at a loss (confused) to finding oneself and being at ease. In most of the cases in which Wittgenstein seems to exercise a critique he does not say that someone or something is *wrong* (contradictory, nonsensical). He says instead that we do not *find our way about* (PI 123). This brings us back to Cavell’s statement that philosophy is about change, conversion, turning and returning, finding peace (OC § 92).

Summing up, how do the *Investigations* portray the philosopher? As someone entangled and engaged in a personal struggle with/against his own perplexities, confusions and illusions (*täuschungen*). Not *mere* illusions but rather, in a Freudian way, illusions that define us (imagined difficulties and hopes, that nonetheless, at an imaginary level, operate on us, revealing part of who we are).

5.

Even when referring to the desire to cease philosophising and when inviting his reader to undergo a transformation and rediscover his place in language – his voice and life as speaker – Wittgenstein, according

to Cavell, is not suggesting to bring philosophy (or even just skepticism or metaphysics) *as such* to an/its end. Yet something like this service is what a number of philosophers do take Wittgenstein's "returning" words to provide. In Richard Rorty's or John McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein, for example, skepticism is idle, having been put behind us as a matter of intellectual progress, or is seen as subject to being "exorcized". But Wittgenstein's wonder is precisely where we find ourselves when we are at a loss and feel we need to return our words to their home in the circulation of the language we share. He is impressed by the fact that we persist in craving for ideal conditions and longing to transcend language games no matter how many times a philosophical quest may push us to seek freedom from them.

The desire that drives us to imagine the disappearance of all philosophical puzzles is ultimately an expression of that very attitude that generated those puzzles. Our attraction towards certain kinds of philosophical theories, whether they aim at showing that language has a structural foundation or whether they aim at skeptically showing that that foundation, although desirable, is not available/accessible, has a common source: the wish to avoid our responsibility towards language – the wish that words were endowed with meaning independently of our need to use them. It is precisely this skeptical assumption that should be diagnosed, since it is the source of our difficulties (not the philosophical challenge the skeptic presumes he is suppose to meet).

The discovery of the ordinary is hence not a one time voyage but rather a number of small journeys, induced by the repeated losses of oneself in doing philosophy, journeys during which the very notion of the ordinary will be reestablished and accepted, bringing back the words and ultimately ourselves to a state of serenity.

A possible answer to the question "What is our state before and after the intervention of philosophy?" is that we are "restless", here taking the lead from the passage in the *Investigations* in which Wittgenstein describes philosophy as thwarting its own search for, or offer of, "peace" (also translatable as "rest"). This is where we find another parallel to psychoanalytic practice. The aim is not so much to produce one crucial insight about oneself, so as to produce a radical and definitive transformation, but rather to achieve a never ending work on oneself. For both Wittgenstein and Freud anxieties, fantasies and temptations, inasmuch as they define us, cannot be dispelled once and for all. What Wittgenstein wants us to keep in mind, just like Freud, is that yes, sometimes the feeling of restlessness is over, but it has not come to an end, as if to warn us that in many (inopportune) moments we will be subject to fall back in similar temptations and fantasies.

This said, here is a place to caution against the idea that Wittgenstein *directly identifies* the work of philosophy with therapy (PI § 255). He says that philosophical treatments are "like" therapies. This points to facts such as that a philosophical problem is painful (for example, it has the form of being lost), and, with respect to psychological therapies, the result may present itself as being liberated, a presentation, as we have just seen, which in turn is subject to illusion.

6.

In *Must we mean what we say* (Cavell 1969), Cavell draws an illuminating distinction between two «voices» within the *Investigations*, the voice of the writing subject (apparently Wittgenstein's own voice) and the voice of its other. The first voice (to speak) is the alluring voice of *temptation* (as Cavell names it), assigned by Wittgenstein to his skeptical interlocutor and dialogical antagonist, the philosopher, or whoever succumbs to the theoretical temptations and to the wish for those ideal conditions that are at play in the *Investigations*. The voice of temptation is easily identifiable by the use of quotation marks. The second voice, named by Cavell the voice of correction, speaks in and for ordinary language, in the attempt of unmasking false necessities (it invites us to acknowledge the lack of necessity of what we believe is – philosophically – necessary (cf. Cavell 1979, p. 21 e 120, see also Cavell 1988)).

As Cavell points out, if the two voices do not refer to two distinct *personae* but rather correspond to two roles or positions that we tend to adopt in relating to philosophy or in thinking about language, then Wittgenstein's interlocutor cannot be a straw man but resembles a side of ourselves, the side of us that believes we must transcend the ordinary and speak "outside the human language games" (OC § 554). The wish to bring philosophy to its end imagines a world in which the voice of correctness will speak without the voice of temptation as its other. But despite Wittgenstein's apparent hostility towards philosophy, the two voices refer to two equally human impulses and belong both to Wittgenstein. Through the voice of temptation Wittgenstein is giving voice to his own impulse to get away from the ordinary. For this reason between them there will always be fluctuation and instability. For this same reason philosophy is never at peace, and peace is what the philosophers yearns for (PI, 133, CV, p 43: "Thoughts are at peace. That's what someone who philosophizes yearns for"). The *Investigations*, ultimately, are the chronicle of a tormented conflict fated to perpetuate itself.

7.

My reference to a therapeutic interpretation of Wittgenstein may prompt the following question: what is the philosophical import of a therapeutic approach?, a question that seems to imply that such an approach does not enjoy any theoretical appeal. Wittgenstein's philosophy has perhaps not by chance been considered a quietest one: "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is [...].Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. — Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain" (PI §124, 126). In considering Wittgenstein's philosophy a quietist one, however, it has been wrongly assumed that quietism is a form of philosophical laziness, as though Wittgenstein only initiated a work that must be carried out and completed in a constructive way. Wittgenstein's remarks, as I noticed above, do not represent the first step of an explanatory account that has to be further articulated. They are rather reminders – addressed to us readers – aiming at recalling what happens when we are tempted to forget the many circumstances in which words are actually employed. Reminders function as a diagnosis of the way certain pictures impose themselves on us and end up holding us captive (PI §103, 112). So yes, there is indeed more work to be done, but this consists in loosening the grip those pictures exercise on us. The difficulty in philosophizing, Wittgenstein points out, is not a cognitive one but a moral one: the ability to resist one's inclinations. This is why, although Wittgenstein states that philosophy leaves everything as it is, its method is a liberating one (PI § 133).

One could still wonder if there is any true therapy in what I outlined so far. Perhaps there isn't, but one should not forget that therapies do not operate in a thaumaturgical way. Often our difficulties are not so much epistemological as connected to the misleading and yet seductive power certain pictures have, the power to make us forget the many ways we operate with and within words and concepts. And pictures are not theories, that can be considered wrong and refuted with a compelling argument. Pictures can only be replaced with other, more perspicuous, ones. Illusions can only be disenchanting, obsessions dispelled. This is a lifelong task, not only because such illusions are rooted in a powerful mythology but because they are part of and express who we are. As Wittgenstein notices, in philosophy we are misled by illusions, yet these illusions are also something, and it takes time and shifts to realize that (1931, MS 110, *Handschriftlicher Nachlass*, p. 239, in WN).

Philosophy is not a constructive discipline that aims at accumulating and enlarging our acquired knowledge but a subtractive work (PI § 128), an activity whose success can be measured in the degree of transformation it allows its readers to achieve. If philosophy aims at providing knowledge, it is not knowledge about empirical facts but acknowledgement of our tendency to fall prey of certain illusions. Philosophy, for Wittgenstein, aims at producing something like an insight in its addressees. In this sense it may well have an active role: it makes us aware of the constraining and confusing influence certain pictures and combinations of words have on us. It can hence change the way we see things (and also the ways we see ourselves),

recognizing that what appeared necessary and inevitable is not inexorable, thus dissolving *this* particular confusion or illusion. Like in psychoanalysis, for a change to be like that, it will have to be *my* change and not just the acceptance of an image someone imposes on me.

In concluding, what we gain through Wittgenstein's method is no resolution of big philosophical questions. What we gain is a new self-understanding, premise for our own transformation. Or, more exactly, this new self-understanding is not even a *premise* for our change (as if reproducing the canonical separation between theory and practice) but is *eo ipso* a change.

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