

CRITICISING FORMS OF LIFE*

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It is frequently but mistakenly assumed that Ludwig Wittgenstein and/or Peter Winch in their remarks on the problems of understanding between ways of life ⁽¹⁾ are putting forward an 'impossibility' argument, claiming that a way of life cannot possibly be criticised from outside. They are understood as maintaining that the standards against which criticism is possible are internal to the way of life itself and are distinctive from those which are found in other ways of life, with the consequence that there are no common standards against which two different ways of life may be compared to the advantage of one of them.

Lawrence M. Hinman ⁽²⁾ seeks to identify something like the above view as 'the standard interpretation' of Wittgenstein's thought and wishes to attribute a primary responsibility for it to Peter Winch. He wishes to contest it both as an account of Wittgenstein's thought and as an argument. He thinks that, construing it as an impossibility argument, it needs to be countered by a case for the possibility; the question to be asked is 'Can a form of life be wrong?' and the answer that needs to be given is in the affirmative. Hinman thinks that by conceding that 'to some extent forms of life differ from one another, presuppose somewhat different standards of meaning, and are constituted in part by rules which vary from one to another' (351) he has identified what is true and desirable in the standard interpretation and has to reject the idea that there is an 'absence of any such shared standards between different forms of life.' He wants to deny this because it has the 'disturbing' effect of inviting 'passivity and resignation rather than dialogue, disagreement and eventual creation of mutual understanding.'

We do not understand either Wittgenstein or Winch as putting forward a general argument about the impossibility of otherwise of mutual

understanding between ways of life⁽³⁾ any more than we read them as trying to rule out the prospect of criticising a practice within a way of life from outside it. They are concerned, first of all, to combat the delusion that there is some universal standard against which all ways of life may be compared and seek to show that people who are subject to it are, in fact, taking a standard drawn from their own way of life and unjustifiably presenting it as an independent yardstick for the appraisal of others. They do not need to argue, nor can we see them as doing so, that ways of life are all quite unrelated and that one way of life can have nothing in common with any other. All they need to maintain is that it sometimes happens that different ways of life do not have in common anything which will enable relevant criticism of one by the other.

One fact which is invariably ignored in these arguments is that Winch was willing to call European witchcraft irrational because of its historical derivation from the Christian tradition whilst being unwilling to say that about the witchcraft of an African tribe because that did not have any relationship of dependence to our traditions, because it was quite independent of our way of life. Inevitably, the proper interpretation of Wittgenstein and, we think, Winch comes down to the consideration of cases - it is not whether there can and must be shared standards between ways of life but whether, in actual instances, there are the conditions for cogent criticism of aspects of one way of life from the point of view of another.

Hinman treats the discussion of the relationship between religion and science (or, more accurately, scientism) as though it were, for Wittgenstein and Winch, a paradigm case for the general problem of understanding between ways of life. In doing this he fails to see that it is the specific problem of understanding between the 'spiritual' and the 'scientific' which exercises both Wittgenstein and Winch and that the problems which arise in

that connection are not to be readily generalised into arguments about 'ways of life.'

Whether there are insuperable obstacles to mutual understanding (and, therefore, to external criticism) is not, then, something to be determined apriori for the simple reason that the answer will depend on the nature of the differences and disagreements involved.

Wittgenstein's warnings against the craving for generality and in favour of concern for the particular case are regularly set aside by those who suppose that his remarks on some specific topic can readily be generalised. If we take him at his word, however, we may expect that his remarks on one thing are made in recognition of the fact that they will not apply to other things of the 'same' sort. Wittgenstein has different things to say about agreement and disagreement in different places and they do show that there are different kinds of disagreements and, consequently, different problems arising from them.

For example, there is his observation that mathematicians do not come to blows.⁽⁴⁾ What makes this fact notable is, presumably, that mathematics is not like other human situations in which disagreements regularly lead to violence. In politics, religion and morals it is not unknown for people to fight one another and for things to be settled by force. In mathematics they can't be settled that way because of the kind of activity mathematics is and the role that disagreements play there; they occasion further mathematical reasoning, not trials of strength.

More germane to present issues are Wittgenstein's comments on the understanding of religion as these are recorded in Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief⁽⁵⁾ which bring out the nature of the gap that separates the religious person from the

I

irreligious one(or,perhaps a person with one religion from a someone with a different one.) These may look like they involve the two in mutual contradiction but this appearance is misleading.Thus:

'Suppose I say the body will rot,and another says "No,particles will rejoin in a thousand years and there will be a resurrection of you." If someone said "Wittgenstein,do you believe this?" I'd say "No". Would you say "I believe the opposite" or "There is no reason to say such a thing?".I'd say neither.'⁽⁷⁾

And

'Suppose someone were a believer and said "I believe in a Last Judgement" and I said "Well,I'm not so sure.Possibly." You would say that there was an enormous gulf between us.If he said "There is a German aeroplane overhead and I said "Possibly,I'm not so sure",you'd say we were fairly near.

It isn't a question of being anywhere near him,but on an entirely different plane.'⁽⁸⁾

What is involved in religious controversies is something quite different from what is involved in 'normal' ones,so much so that

'these controversies look quite different from normal controversies.

Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons.

They are,in a way,quite inconclusive.

The point is that if there were evidence this would in fact destroy the whole business.'⁽⁹⁾

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The issue is not,then,whether there are or are not shared standards between someone who has a religion and someone who does not share it,the problem has to do with the nature of religious expression and the kind of thing it says and the fact is - at least in Wittgenstein's view - that those things are not the sort that can be contradicted or refuted (at least by remarks which are not themselves religious). The things which divide one from the other are not those on which evidence or perhaps even argument has any bearing.There is even something misleading about saying they are far apart when they are ^{really} on different planes.The differences between them are not such that they contradict one another or differ in opinions but that their ways

of thinking depart from each other:

'There are, for instance, these entirely different ways of thinking, first of all - which needn't be expressed by one person saying one thing, another person another thing.'⁽¹⁰⁾

These whole point in our citation of these remarks is to stress that they cannot be taken as representative of the difficulties of mutual comprehension between ways of life but that they show up one sort of difficulty, one which is tied up with the nature of religion as disagreements amongst mathematicians are tied up with the nature of mathematics. They show that in one part of human life there are exceptional difficulties in mutual comprehension and that there are great difficulties in overcoming them.

The resistance which Wittgenstein shows to the urge for generality should prevent us from saying that the gap between people on different planes [to one another] cannot be bridged by dialogue but it should equally well discourage us from searching for some guarantee that it can. For reasons quite extraneous to Wittgenstein's concerns it has become a matter of principled dispute amongst many philosophers and sociologists as to whether mutual understanding between societies is possible. Some want to hold that understanding between cultures must in principle be possible, others want to hold that it is not.

Wittgenstein's work should not provide us with arguments to favour either side in this controversy but should fortify us against the risk of being tempted to take one, to accept its formulation as a principled issue or to think of understanding as the kind of thing that can intelligibly be discussed in terms of guarantees. After all, the issue of understanding a way of life does not arise except in terms of specifics, of understanding this one from the point of view of that and the difficulties of understanding that do arise will not result from their being different ways

of life but of their being the particular ways of life that they are. What kind of understanding will prove possible between them must depend upon the 'chemistry' of their conjunction.

There is no basis in Wittgenstein's numerous comments on the nature of human beings and their lives for supposing that understanding between them must be either impossible or inevitable. He seems to try to maintain a perspicuous view of the balance of homogeneity and heterogeneity amongst humans. He tries not to lose sight of the fact that human beings are, after all, human beings, members of the same species with their animal constitution (which has ramifying consequences for the lives they do lead) in common. At the same time he emphasises how much the practices which they create may diverge from one another. Human lives develop in very different directions from the common 'starting points' provided by their species inheritance. It is the fact that human beings are the kinds of creatures that they are which lets them take to training, to learn languages and other practices. The fact that a human being might, with equal ease, have been inducted into either of two ways of life does not, however, mean that having been drawn into the one now adopt the other with the same facility as if he had been brought up to it - learning a second language is not the same as learning a first and, of course, a language like ours makes Chinese harder to learn than French. Two ways of life might, then, be organised in such ways that the grasp of one is inimical to the understanding of another.

102
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There is nothing in Wittgenstein to encourage the facile idea that better understanding reduces disagreement, that finding some alien outlook more intelligible should make it more acceptable to us. As far as the case of religious belief is concerned, Wittgenstein's remarks suggest that a clearer understanding of it by those who do not share it will often make

them aware that they are further apart, not closer together, than they had thought. It may indeed be that in some cases that something which initially seems alien and repugnant (perhaps seems repugnant because alien) may on closer and more thoughtful consideration prove to be just another normal and acceptable variant to our own practice, a way of life which just is different from our own and which can be respected. In other cases, this may not be so. A better understanding of fascism may not make it any more attractive and the better we come to understand it the more we may be repelled by it. It is certainly no part of either Wittgenstein's or Winch's aim to make us morally indiscriminate and insensitive. On the contrary, they want to make us more discriminating, not less.

If we may animadvert once again the Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough⁽¹¹⁾ in which he deals most directly with the topic Hinman is discussing it is quite obvious that his objective is not that of showing that one cannot criticise ways of life because he is thoroughly critical not just of Frazer's specific arguments, but of his whole mentality, which is spiritually impoverished and complacent. Frazer's outlook is inferior to that which it presumes to criticise because it is blind to the very things to which the allegedly primitive mentality shows itself sensitive. It is certainly not Wittgenstein's idea that Frazer's and the primitive's outlook are every bit as good as one another's for Frazer's is inferior to the primitives.

The argument against Frazer sustains, further, our point about the specificity of the problem, because the misunderstanding of magical practices which Wittgenstein finds in Frazer's writings is a product not of some general and intrinsic obscurity of magic but because the kind of religious and intellectual position from which Frazer tries to understand them is one which makes that effort difficult and problematical - putting it very

crudely, it is a point of view which wants to understand an alien outlook but cannot acknowledge that there can be any outlook other than its own. The objection to Frazer is not, then, that he cannot criticise religious and magical practices because these are 'immune from all criticism' but that he cannot criticise them in the ways that he tries to do, for they do not have the faults that he attributes to them.

The arguments which Winch develops in both The Idea of a Social Science and 'Understanding a Primitive Society',⁽¹²⁾ are likewise about the capacity of a specific kind of (what we have called 'scientistic') attitude to serve as a basis for understanding human lives, not because of the intrinsic impossibility of understanding a way of life from without, but because of certain characteristics of that attitude which (in his view) inhibit it from being able to appreciate the difference between itself and other. The main obstacles which will stand in the way of its understanding of diverse ways of life are often those of its own creation - to those difficulties which are ordinarily possible it has added some. Winch's argument against Evans-Pritchard is, like Wittgenstein's against Frazer, that Evans-Pritchard is far from doing what he thinks he is doing - comparing magic and science with a common and independent standard - and is in fact simply making an invidious comparison of their way of life with a standard rather arbitrarily and inappropriately taken from our own. In arguing this Winch is far from misrepresenting Wittgenstein and is in fact echoing the latter's own comments on the matter of oracular consultation. Wittgenstein asks 'Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it?' and answers himself 'If we call this "wrong" aren't we using our language game to combat theirs?'⁽¹³⁾