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Under the Influence

R. J. ANDERSON and W. W. SHARROCK

As far as we understand it, Hugo Meynell's¹ argument runs as follows:

1. It is possible to find in Wittgenstein's later writings on the foundations of logic and mathematics a collection of propositions which, at first sight, might add up to an assertion of the incommensurability of the various competing accounts of the natural and social world.
2. This possibility has inspired sociologists such as Derek Phillips and David Bloor to canvass the suggestion that all knowledge is entirely determined by convention and hence the truth of propositions is relative to any given social milieu. Changes in attitudes towards systems of propositions are to be explained simply by changes in the social forces determining knowledge.
3. The paradoxical nature of the conventionalism of this type of sociology of knowledge is both obvious and pernicious. It poses a threat to the institutionalized practices of rational debate and argument. It can be countered by the adoption of a very different position also to be found in Wittgenstein's later writings, one which for ease of reference we will call modified conventionalism. The main part of Meynell's paper is given over to sketching out and defending this modified conventionalism.

In what follows, we will question the claim that Wittgenstein does, albeit somewhat coyly, adopt this position of modified conventionalism. We do so not to give aid and comfort to the relativizing tendency in the sociology of knowledge, for we are in firm agreement with Meynell here. Relativism is an *absurd* doctrine, and one which Wittgenstein never adopted. All we wish to show is that the passages which Meynell cites in support of his contention could equally well be read in another way, one which does not lead to the conclusion that Wittgenstein was a closet absolutist. Our reading would consign Wittgenstein neither to absolutism nor to conventionalism, but has him (as ever) engaged in an argument with both.

What we have called modified conventionalism consists in the acceptance of the possibility of a set of *a priori* judgments about the nature of the world whose truth would be independent of the ways that we might, in fact,

¹ Hugo Meynell, 'Doubts About Wittgenstein's Influence', *Philosophy* 57, No. 220 (1982), 251–259.

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speak about the world. Modified conventionalism does not require that we be in possession of such a set, merely that we accept the possibility. In this sense, modified conventionalism might equally well be thought of as realism-at-a-distance. The set of judgments which are held to be *a priori* true underpin all of the competing versions of the way that things are which Bloor and Phillips would take to be incommensurable. In suggesting this possibility, Meynell is picking his way between the ultraconventionalism which requires that all versions be deemed equally acceptable, and the absolutism which requires that just one have paramourcy, the one which embodies the canonical procedures known to reveal the logical structure of the world. All the competing versions, on Meynell's argument, will rest upon the same fundamental, true judgments.

This assertion of Meynell's is not an empirical one. It is not to be tested by examining the stories of the origin of natural order to be found in *Genesis*, *The Origin of Species* and Aboriginal dream-time myths to see what they have in common. It is an epistemological one. Under a uniform method of assessment, namely the evaluation of these stories in the light of appropriate evidence, they would all, eventually, reduce to the same fundamental propositions or judgments. In suggesting that this modified conventionalism is to be found in Wittgenstein, Meynell is not only intent on saving logic, mathematics and science from Bloor and Phillips. He is also intent on saving Wittgenstein from himself. In our view, neither is necessary.

Meynell begins by suggesting that certain passages in *On Certainty* indicate that Wittgenstein was prepared to countenance the possibility of a set of true, *a priori* judgments. These passages are paragraphs 83 and 204. We will quote them in full.

83. The *truth* of certain empirical proofs belongs to our frame of reference.
204. Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; —but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language game.

Meynell appears to be reading 83 to say that the truth of some proofs is a property of some foundational scheme of judgments. However, it seems to us to be more in keeping with the tenor of Wittgenstein's more usual way of putting things to interpret it as saying that what can be said to be true or false of some state of affairs depends upon the nature of the state of affairs under investigation, and why and how it is being investigated. There can only be true propositions where it is possible to have false ones, and both only arise in the contexts of uncertainties. That some things are not to be doubted is not a *logical* matter at all. It would simply make no sense

to bring the concepts of truth and falsity to bear upon them, to use the phrasing which reverberates throughout *On Certainty*. The existence, or otherwise, of external objects is just such a case.

We would suggest that Meynell's reading of 'the language game' in 204 as *the* language game is similarly off beam. Proposing that the term refers to some putative set of propositional attitudes which is basic to our knowledge of the world seems a bit strained. A more plausible interpretation would be to have the phrase referring to the practices of justifying and giving evidence and grounds. These practices have to come to an end somewhere. But this end is not a set of propositions which, somehow, are rendered indubitable. It is the determination that further doubt is leading nowhere and hence is a pointless exercise. The sceptic is not answered with propositions. Rather, the activity of scepticism is shown no longer to be meaningful. The putting of an end to doubting is, then, a practical matter and not a logical one at all, except in so far as drawing the line will also be done in logic but not justified by logic.

Meynell's interest is not the foundational set of propositions, but the method by which they are obtained. This method will provide a generalizable criterion for determining truth. We would like to make just two observations about this. First, because Wittgenstein could not divorce the determination of truth from the possibility of doubt, a generalizable criterion for truth would require a generalization of doubt. And yet all of Wittgenstein's musings in *On Certainty* seem to point to the fact that he could find no sense in the conception of generalized doubt. He repeatedly avers that we can only doubt particular things, and some very specific particular things at that. Wittgenstein's rejection proceeds on two fronts. As Meynell points out, he rejects it as a philosophic method (i.e. in its guise as scepticism) because the doubter is not in the position of being able to doubt everything at once. In trying to do so, the sceptic is trapped in a paradox. But Wittgenstein also rejects generalizable doubt because it is an empty notion. Doubts only arise in the face of particular cases of inconsistency, anomalous sets of events, and so on. Since there are only particular states of affairs, there can only be the possibility of particular doubts about the truth or falsity of propositions concerning them. We never face the task of determining the truth or falsity of propositions about states of affairs in general, and hence do not need a method for that. One of the few positive conclusions which Wittgenstein comes to is that whenever we come across a case where the inconsistency is such that we might be thought likely to engage in generalized doubt (perhaps backward moving causation might be such a one) we surround the instance with qualifications, accommodations, hedges and explanations, and so defuse it. Logic simply never faces the problem of coping with generalizable doubt by using a generalizable method to ensure generalized consistency. Rather it faces the much more immediate and practical task of determining just how

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far and in what ways *this* proposition is inconsistent with *these*, and just what can be done to render the inconsistency harmless.

Our second observation has to do with the crucial terms in the method for determining valid judgments. For Meynell

. . . the right way to go about it is (i) to attend to the evidence, (ii) to think up a range of possibilities which might account for it, and (iii) to judge as (probably or certainly) the case that possibility which seems best supported by the evidence (p. 255).

Wittgenstein argues consistently that what is to count as 'evidence', what is to circumscribe the 'possibilities', and what is to fix the weight that 'evidence' gives to 'possibilities' are all located within sets of particular practices, be they natural science, logic or the law. There can be no way of laying down criteria outside of these practices. Hence the one, foundational language game will, itself, be resting upon the language games which it was supposed to be securing. This does not mean, as Bloor and Phillips seem to think, that Wittgenstein is saying that mathematics and logic are merely the epiphenomena of particular forms of social organization. Rather, it is because they are socially institutionalized that they do not need foundations and justifications to do the work that they do. Saying that mathematics has no foundations does not mean that we cannot count sheep, or debts, or the miles to Alpha Centauri. Saying that logic has no need of justification does not mean that we cannot discriminate good reasoning from bad. Because we can imagine other systems of measuring and counting, other ways of drawing inferences, does not mean that our ways have to be justified. What it does mean, though, is that what is to be given as true, reasonable, logical, and so forth in our form of life is the outcome of the practices which we use. It just so happens, as a matter of our local natural history so to speak, that one of the prominent ones is the method which Meynell describes.

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