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THE AUTONOMY OF LANGUAGE-GAMES

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TWO IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

Part of the inheritance of Wittgenstein is a certain philosophical terminology or jargon (as Wittgenstein himself would probably term it). "Private language", "family resemblances" and "language-game", to give a few well-known examples, have in the past been recognised as important and formidable concepts, and they endure (albeit in a less auspicious manner) in the present-day field of philosophy as controversial and influential items.

In what follows I shall examine in detail a key aspect of one of the above concepts, the "language-game", an item Wittgenstein clearly regarded as being a very real part of the world of human affairs.

For Wittgenstein and many of his followers (chiefly those of the later philosophy), the language-game is seen as an *autonomous* or *self-justifying* system. I believe this is basically correct, and that an explication of such autonomy is essential to understanding, firstly, the concept of a language-game and, secondly, why certain forms of critical inquiry in relation to a given language-game appear odd or mistaken in some fashion.

Autonomy, it will become clear, is best approached through an analysis of what I call (and shall frequently be referring to as) *intrusiveness*. As a distinct and independent system of discourse and living (to state it simply), a language-game is governed by rules that specify what sorts of behaviour - linguistic and otherwise - are practised in the game. Intrusion, I hope to show, consists in presenting to the game a procedure that not only breaks the rules but also appears as something far removed from the everyday conduct within that system.

Before we start to scrutinize the intruder, however, we need first to take a closer look at what it is that is being intruded on - what kind of "system of discourse and living" is a language-game, that we may go on and examine the sense in which it is autonomous?

The nature of a language-game, as an acquaintance with the relevant literature will quickly reveal, defies explicit definition¹, and Wittgenstein and the more eminent of his disciples systematically avoid presenting the concept to their readership in this manner. And as far as simple descriptions go, most appear

rather too imprecise to be very helpful. Norman Malcolm speaks of a "system of thinking and acting"², while in the *Investigations* (and elsewhere) Wittgenstein uses from time to time the title "form of life" in place of "language-game"³. - Given that there is a great deal that may be quite properly described as a "form of life", and in the absence of a clear account of how the description is to be applied, it seems to do little in the way of explanation.

The best - though by no means entirely satisfactory - way of coming to grips with just what we are to identify as a language-game is to concentrate on specific examples given to us by the experts, rather than their often-hasty general descriptions. In Wittgenstein's later philosophy we have a host of cases presented to us, some in detail, others - perhaps most - only sketchily. The *Investigations* is packed with examples, many of which strike us as simple and homely sorts of human activities: giving orders, asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying and so on - a large number of which Wittgenstein is contented merely to list, noting as he does so that, as basic sorts of speech-acts, their number is "countless" (P.I., S 23).

The language-game, however, is not *just* the kind of item we may describe as a *command* or *request* and suchlike. Occasionally in the *Investigations* and more often in his preliminary notes (*Blue and Brown Books*) as well as other jottings (*Zettle; On Certainty*) we meet much more complex examples: making up a story and reading it (P.I., S 23), talk about material objects (P.I., pg 200), descriptive geometry, chemical symbolism (*Blue and Brown Books*, pg 81) and even mathematics in its entirety (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, V 15).

Norman Malcolm, a keen follower and one-time pupil of Wittgenstein's, by concentrating on the grander cases has produced some rather controversial examples of his own. In his book *Thought and Knowledge* and elsewhere (for example his memoir of Wittgenstein, pg 60, and his article on St. Anselm's ontological arguments) Malcolm speaks straight-forwardly of an entire discipline - especially religion, but also science - as being a *form of life*, a *language-game* (*Thought and Knowledge*, pg 212), and he suggests to us in a matter-of-fact way that Wittgenstein shared this view⁴.

For Malcolm, a language-game, as a form of life, is a fairly well-delineated practice of what he terms "language embedded in action" (*ibid.*, pg 212). It is, to call on one of those hasty descriptions, "agreement in language, possession of common concepts... a common way of conceptualising experience together with accompanying kinds of behaviour" (*Hacker*, 1980 pg 220). In its structure, a language-game possesses its own criteria of rationality, successful conduct and intelligibility.

Not a lot is said though about the precise sense in which a language-game has "rule-generated boundaries" and how certain kinds of behaviour are "intrusive" to this "autonomy". A brief example is needed to help these preliminary proceedings along. Consider then what might be called the *trainee artillery squad language-game* and an intrusive act within that system:

We have a group of soldiers on the practice range of their camp. These men are trainee gunners, and their squad is led by an officer whose job it is to supervise the men as they go about loading a howitzer in preparation for firing.

Now, because the men are still in training and their work is potentially lethal, they are watched closely by the officer, who stops them at certain stages and checks what they have done. This is not hard for us to imagine. The officer shouts in a brisk military fashion: "artillery squad, stop and check!" and waits for a verbal report from the men in which details of the progress are given and any difficulties are noted. At a given point the checking procedure may be as follows: Soldier one looks at the elevation of the barrel; soldier two inspects the setting of the aim; soldier three makes sure the wheels are locked; while soldier four examines the position of the anti-recoil mechanism.

Importantly, as this procedure takes place each soldier may be given to various sorts of worries and doubts: Is *this* screw tight enough?; should *that* be a little looser?; how secure is *this*; should *that* be adjusted? and so on. Any faults that are detected would be reported and remedied. For example: "The elevation is half a degree off!" - and the correction made. And, of course, any doubts would be raised and dealt with.

Now, suppose that as the checking gets underway, one of the men expresses

genuine concern for the *possibility* of the shell in the barrel *dematerializing*. Our fellow says to the officer: "Sir, the thought has just occurred to me that the shell may no longer exist! No one of us is directly perceiving it, and it may very well have gone out of existence since being placed in the detonating chamber!".

How would this sort of remark fare in the language-game? Would the issue of dematerialization be treated as a *legitimate* difficulty? Would it be in order for the officer to say something like "Yes! that *is* a worry! But in war you don't have time to deal with such matters; you just have to cross your fingers and hope for the best!?" In philosophy the existence of unperceived physical objects is a real issue (especially with young philosophers). However, on the practice range of an army base is the matter at all appropriate to raise?

Undoubtedly, such a concern and ones like it are quite out-of-place in the trainee artillery squad language-game. Worries about objects vanishing into thin air because they cannot be detected by the senses are not given a moment's thought by the players, the so-called problem of dematerialization *just does not exist* in that system. Such matters appear quite ridiculous in the military context, as well as many others. They come across as being decidedly silly, and most people would consider them a waste of time.

Most people would also want to say, I think, that the officer and his trainees are not answerable to the so-called problem of dematerialization, that they are excused of any obligation to respond to the suggestion in such a manner as to give it recognition as a legitimate difficulty.

But *why* is this issue a silly one? I want to propose *autonomy* as the answer. However, not everyone will forward and account of autonomy. Someone might want to say that the problem is a *redundant* one, one, that is, that *used* to be workable, only now in light on many careful investigations is regarded as being definitively solved. - We have known for some time that things do not cease to exist simply because they are not seen, smelt, felt, heard and so on. A second example of a redundant problem would be the *danger* of sailing off the edge of the world. Another explanation might have it that the dematerialization matter

can only be raised *successfully* if the timing is right, that it truly counts as a real concern, only the battlefield or practice range is not the place to point out such difficulties. We might very well call this the *awkward moment argument*, and anyone supporting it might suggest the mess or barracks as the right location in which to deal with the matter. A third explanation would be the view that the whole subject belongs to philosophy or physics (or some kind of combination of the two), and not to the army. This is to say that it does indeed count as a kosher concern, only it is one exclusively dealt with by other *areas*, and *that* is why it seems so strange in the context of the firing range.

On my view the soldiers are excused for none of the above three explanations, Instead, their exemption is based on this business of the problem failing to qualify under the rules and practice of the language-game as a legitimate, a *true* problem. This is to say that the abovementioned type of dematerialization is not for the trainee artillery squad language-game a real concern in any way whatsoever, and that instead it amounts to the intrusion of a procedure of one language-game on to another.

In what follows I will be advancing the notion that, as an autonomous system of thought and action, a language-game is not answerable to moves (claims, arguments, etc.) that are, as Malcolm puts it, *alien* to its practice⁵. A language-game is self-governing in that all forms of inquiry, justification, explanation, criticism and evaluation that are binding to it must be conducted exclusively under the terms of the system in question. And regarding intrusion, I will be forwarding a scheme that enables one to see exactly how and why a given move or act is an intrusive one. This second objective is really the primary aim of this paper, and I believe that an account of autonomy, as told through an analysis of intrusion, may be given precisely and without too much conceptual complexity. Also, the explication of autonomy will make more evident the reality or existence of language-games and their self-justifying nature.

NOTES

1. The reason for this is perhaps, as Patrick Sherry puts it, "...that Wittgenstein's use of the term is so wide as to cover both conceptual systems like geometry, chemistry or talk about physical objects, and 'speech-acts' like asking questions and giving orders. This variety seems to preclude any single definition of the concept ..." (*Sherry, 1977 pg 24*).
2. I have taken this description of Malcolm's from a passage of his quoted on page 35 of this paper.
3. See, for example, P.I. pg 147. Also, P.I. S23 gives us the reason for this: "The term *language-game* is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or a form of life".
4. None of the published work of the later philosophy contains religion as a *clear* example of a *form of life*. However, from various notes taken at Wittgenstein's lectures we may glean considerable support for Malcolm's view. See especially *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, pg 58.
5. The example of Malcolm's from which the term is taken is worth keeping in mind: "Nothing is put forward in the Old or New Testament as evidence for the existence of God. Someone whose religious concepts were formed exclusively from the Bible, might regard this question of evidence as a alien intrusion. It would have no contact with the religious ideas he had learned. It is my impression that this suggestion of evidence plays no part in workaday religious instruction and practice, and puts in an appearance only when the language is idling." (*Hick, 1964 pg 108*).