Facing up to Wittgenstein’s Diaries of Cambridge and Skjolden: Notes on Self-knowledge and Belief

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His circles with language reveal themselves ethically grounded, his search for philosophical clarity as a search for clarity about himself. (Somavilla, 1997, p. 8)

1. A Methodic Procedure: To see any problem from a religious point of view

This sentence was taken as a methodic procedure for investigating philosophical questions regarding scientific psychology. To accomplish such a proposal is a very hard task to our mentality dominated by a certain mechanical way of seeing and thinking the world, specially for psychologists because they do not usually consider their problems from a religious point of view, even those religiously oriented. They believe all matters are liable to be subject of scientific treatment and never think they are working with religious categories and they also do not realize that in their scientific theories religious beliefs are embedded. Good illustrations of it can be found in the ways they deal with both the problem of the self and of the self-knowledge; some of them appeal to neuro-physiology or psychopharmacology and try to explain exactly the immeasurable coordination between mind and brain involved; and others defend psycho-sociological theories.

The error made by those who research under the neurophysiological perspective is the attempt of approaching scientifically something which is not a scientific but a philosophical problem, as was shown by Drury (1973). And those who try to understand the self by coordinating it to body and environment ascribe to these the responsibility for its settlement and growth. They think of the self as a material object whose nature must be discovered through the use of mental testing, questionnaires, attitude scales, interviews and a whole arsenal of psychological phenomena measurement instruments. Self-knowledge and the knowledge of other selves are for them a matter of mastering a technique, anyone an individual can choose among the so many existing in the market of psychotherapies, these social practices that, in the last resort, aim at the revelation and the reconstruction of the patient’s self and the achievement of an ideal of self-knowledge.

All these techniques provided by applied science as commodities in the market of psychotherapy could be seen from the perspective of the technologies of the self, concept used by Foucault (1980) in his studies about the constitution of the subject and the modern concept of the self. Through his analysis of the experience of sexuality he connected to his philosophical activity. His notes on the question of the self and self-knowledge related to his religious beliefs came out to me as an example of a religious way of seeing problems of contemporary psychology.

According to Foucault’s description (1980), examination of conscience and confession are among the most important techniques of the self oriented towards the discovery and formulation of the truth concerning oneself. Their importance is in the fact that for the government of people in our societies obedience must not be enough and everyone is required also to produce and publish the truth about oneself (p. 163), in the way these two procedures were conceived by pagan philosophers.

2. The Self and the Perfect

Wittgenstein’s Diaries (1997) are basically made out of these two self technologies. He begins the Diary of Cambridge by declaring that one need a bit of courage in order to write a reasonable observation about himself (p. 19). And later on, in the Diary of Skjolden he writes: How hard is to know oneself, to confess honestly what one is (p. 94).

The search for perfection can be read in the notes of 15.3.1937:

Knowing one’s own self is dreadful because one knows at the same time the living demands, &, and one knows he is not satisfying it. However, there is no better way of knowing oneself than to look for the Perfect. Therefore, the Perfect should awaken in men a tempest of resentment; if they do not want to feel completely humiliated. I believe the words Blessed, the one that is not angry with me means: Blessed the one who withstands the vision of the Perfect (p. 95).

If writing about one own self is a hard task that asks for courage and honesty, and if it produces resentment in men because they discover before the Perfect that they can not satisfy the life demand, however, it is possible to learn about one own self and that exists a best way of accomplishing this task which is to know the Perfect; being God
the coordinated idea. In the development of this thought, Wittgenstein (1997) distinguishes two meanings of Perfect: in the first meaning it is something entirely other (ganz anderes), and in the second, he is a human being; and they would correspond to the two different images of God: the world creator and the one present in the creature, the human being. So, he writes that we hear the sentences: God created the world and This man is – God, but we do not hear somebody saying that this man created the world (p. 95).

These two meanings of the Perfect are united in Christ’s ethics. Because he existed in this world as God’s son and as the verb that emanates from God, the entirely other whose name is unspeakable, his word is the real ethics. And Wittgenstein points out that the use of the expression “Christ, the Redeemer” shows he is also understood as God. Jesus Christ is a man that is God because he is the Redeemer. However, he affirms that it is not possible to call him this way without calling him God, because a man can not create (21.11.1936). Bouwsma (1986) reports that in conversations with Wittgenstein defended that Jesus Christ was the only man who could teach ethics, that means, give advice to his disciples, because he was in some way higher than those he teaches and because he suffered with them in respect to those sufferings he was to give counsel. And the taught, stresses Bouwsma, must confess to him the innermost secrets of his life, holding nothing back. This would be the teaching in ethics (p. 46).

Christ offers the way for searching the Perfect, the possibility given to man for showing himself also as a son of God; and the practice of Christian ethics will put him in this path. The love of the Perfect appeared to Wittgenstein as the summary of Christian doctrine and in the notes of 6th April, 1937, he exposes an interpretation of it:

Awake perfectly! By writing this command he begins his interpretation showing firstly the consequences of following it: If you do this you will recognize you are not good to anybody; & this will cease to you the joy you have in this world. And it can also no more return if you stay awake. After such a terrifying sentence he affirms that a man in this condition needs redemption because otherwise he would get lost. Since he should stay in life living in a world which is dead to him, he would need to live under a new light coming from some other place. A light in which can not have any intelligence or any wisdom; because to this world that man is dead. If a man considers himself as dead, he has to welcome the idea of living in another life, because on the contrary his life would become pure despair. This other life is described by Wittgenstein as having the task of maintaining that man almost suspended above this Earth, which means that he walks on the Earth but he does not rest more on the Earth and is hung in Heaven and not hold up by the Earth. And he concludes the note identifying this other life with love and faith: But this life is love, the human love, the love of perfection. And faith is this love.

To follow Christian doctrine according to his interpretation is entering the way for living the life of a saint, the man who lives in this life suspended between our world and heaven. And Wittgenstein (1997) writes about the many doubts and fears he had concerning his capacity of carrying out Christian ethics in such a radical way he interpreted it. The most intense inner battle he engaged himself is referred to the question of what should command belief: consciousness or the Scriptures. So, in 27th January, 1937 he wrote that primacy should be given to consciousness because being a book, a document, the Bible could not obligate him to believe in the lessons it concentrates, and he argues that: The belief begins with the very fact of believing. One should begin with belief: from words it does not follow any faith (p. 98).

3. The Resistances of a Pure Heart

Wittgenstein (1997) discussed the resistances he had to follow religious commandments. Some of his observations in this sense appear out of a reflection about the meaning of the liberation through death doctrine. Liberation by sacrifice, he argues, could consist in the fact that Christ made what all of us want to but can not, and that in faith we identify ourselves with him, by the fact we pay the fault under a more modest way of acknowledgement.

During Easter 1937, Wittgenstein (1997) analyzed a sentence about the confrontation between acting by faith that comes from a pure heart and acting by obedience to religious commandments: I want to do it if this will come to me from the heart & not because I received a command. If the acting comes from the heart, he says, it is not obedience and not also self-immolation, it is only what comes to someone’s heart. This kind of action would not lead to death but obedience yes: You will not die. On the contrary, you die exactly by obeying an order by pure obedience. And acting by pure obedience is an agony that can and must be a pious agony. Wittgenstein concludes these notes by declaring he understood acting in obedience to religious commandments that way and by a confession: But I myself! – I confess I do not want to perish, even if I understand what is the highest (p. 99).

After this analysis, Wittgenstein (1997) records that by having had these thoughts he slept badly the preceding nights, that he felt himself as dead, that he could not work, that he had the thoughts confused, and that he was depressed in a sinister way. All of this meant for him that he was afraid of certain religious thoughts (p. 99). In another entry (28.1.1937), he defends that fear participates as a foundation of the psychological meaning of God, because it is a basic instinctive reaction. He writes he understood what people means when they say that faith brings men the blessedness. They mean that faith (and bliss) freed from the fear caused by men since it puts them immediately into God’s service. Man finds himself, let’s say, in the vicinity of the Kingdom (p. 73). Being so, fear caused by humans would lead people to surrender to the protecting superior force of God.

Wittgenstein (1997) saw in the investigation of the self a form of consolation. So, he reports an anxiety that usually disturbed his consciousness and that became severe that day (13.02.1937) due to the reading of some Kierkegaard’s writings. He confess the motive of disturbance was that he did not want to suffer, he did not want to renounce to any comfort and to enjoyments. For example, he writes, I will not fast and I will not also damage myself by eating. To this I have added in myself the existence of a lack of humbleness impossible of being rooted out. And after such a sort of confessions he concludes that this investigation of himself was his only way of having consolation. It is as if I could do nothing but only find consolation through the knowledge of my deplorable nature (p. 77).

4. After Putting a Good Face on Wittgenstein’s Diaries

These thoughts when presented to psychologists provoke in them reactions of uneasiness and it is, in fact, a terrific experience the confrontation with our logical and linguistic
alienation woke up by reading Wittgenstein’s philosophy. However, the use of the sentence about seeing all problems from a religious point of view as a methodic procedure has shown itself useful for revealing realities psychologists do not pay much attention.

Through the use of this procedure it emerged clearly to me, from one side, the idea of an existing unconscious network of religious concepts operating as foundations of scientific psychological notions that the majority of psychologists have resistance to become aware of and analyze. From another side, considering we are used to see everything not only liable to be subject of scientific treatment but also as merchandise (even the most immaterial productions of spiritual life, health care, or well-being), the reading of Wittgenstein’s notes on the self and self-knowledge developed to me a portrayal of a certain form of knowledge (the religious-philosophical) that can not be bought as if it were a commodity. And by this movement another unconscious formation appears and we tread on the ground of the political economy that rules the market of symbolic wealth exchanges where psychotherapies and other technologies of the self circulate.

References