Some Reflections about Wittgenstein´s *Bezugssystem*

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Only a few months before his death, Wittgenstein invited us to imagine "that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid"; nevertheless he warned "this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid" (OC 96). Those hardened propositions provide a certainty which is "like a mighty force whose point of application does not move, and so no work is accomplished by it" (Z 402). There are many things that seem to be fixed, things which are removed from the traffic: they are "so to speak shunted onto an unused siding" (OC 210). Those things just give "our way of looking at things, and our researches, their form" (OC 211). Maybe they were once disputed; but perhaps, for unthinkable ages, they have belonged to the scaffolding of our thoughts.

Wittgenstein himself admitted there is no sharp boundary between propositions of logic and empirical propositions (OC 319); besides, he noticed that the concept "proposition" (*Satz)* is not a sharp one (OC 320). As Wittgenstein pointed out, we shall consider a proposition as grammatical only if it is used so (RC III, 19), that is, a proposition may be grammatical or empirical depending on the context where it appears (cf. Z 427; OC 98). We can say about an empirical proposition "One could imagine this in another way" or "One could imagine the opposite too" (cf. RFM IV, 4), while the proposition which can be imagined only as true becomes grammatical and loses its temporal nature (cf. OC 57): in fact, these are propositions about which language users agree, although it would be more suitable to regard those propositions as "nonsense" (PI 252), or like a mere whistling or a simple humming (Z 401). One of the examples Wittgenstein chose to show what he meant by "grammatical proposition" was "Every rod has a length" (PI 251). He says when we try to imagine that proposition, the only we can imagine is a rod: there is no room to imagine a picture of the opposite. We can imagine a rod, but not "Every rod has a length". Anyway, we must not forget that whenever attention is paid to an apparent but isolated grammatical proposition, it will always be possible to contemplate such proposition as empirical, although this should demand to put it in a context we shall have chosen *ad hoc*. In this sense, we can resort to a golden rule which consists in imagining that apparent grammatical proposition is employed to teach a child how any term from such proposition can be used: for example, we could choose "Every rod has a length" to show somebody how the nouns "rod" and "length" are used, but also to teach that boy or girl how he or she can use the adjective "every" or the verb "to have".

Empirical propositions that count as certain for us are countless (OC 273), and the truth of these propositions (OC 83) belongs to our frame of reference (*Bezugssystem*). By the way, when I refer to a frame of reference I shall allude to the channel made up by grammatical (or hardened) propositions. For this point I base mainly on what Wittgenstein said once about such frames. In his opinion, every empirical (or fluid) proposition can work as a rule if that proposition is verified and immobilized in such a way that all the representation revolves around it; so that proposition becomes a part of the frame of reference and independent of facts (RFM VII, 74): in the end the hardened proposition becomes a paradigm to judge experience (RFM VI, 22), that is to say, it becomes a norm of description *(Norm der Beschreibung)* (OC 167). At the bottom of this frame there is a grammatical basis shared by every human being since it will make sense to talk in terms of "human beings" only if one can say all of them have sensations; they see; are blind; hear; are deaf; are conscious or unconscious, etc. Wittgenstein pointed out these characteristics can be said "only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being" (PI 281): I think the words in brackets, "behaves like" *(sich ähnlich benimmt)*, place the emphasis not on the beings (or even "things" such as automata) which resemble living human beings, but on the common human form of life itself. On the other hand, it is obvious there are very different cultures and societies: a Tibetan Buddhist monk and an Irish fisherman share, as I said above, a common form of life, but besides, each of them is immersed in a rather different form of life which means different habits and a different linguistic community. So the main point is not how to draw the boundary between two different forms of life, but the fact that there are different forms of life.

Since all languages are founded on convention (PI 355), that is, since they require not only agreement in judgments and definitions (PI 242), but a regular connection between what people say and do too (PI 207), the idea of a "form of life" entails collective activities: there is no room for individual forms of life. By the way, the most famous example of this logical impossibility is the private language user´s; as this individual should not lean on the common frame of reference, he has no criterion of correctness, and whatever is going to seem right to him is right (PI 258). The private language user is fated to see the ground vanishing under his feet because there is no room to talk about "right"; in other words, communication turns out to be impossible from the beginning. Sometimes, however, communication is possible but it may be hindered because of the appearance of solidified or grammatical propositions which are not shared by all the members of the linguistic community in question; in fact, the only requirement for these propositions is a practice which can be carried out not by one unique individual, but by individuals having mutual responses and interactions. Some circles of the frame of reference are wide enough to hold such propositions: it is true in some circles (for example, the grammar of sensations) there will not be room for these propositions, but they can proliferate in areas like religion, art, politics, or philosophy itself. So a remark like "You can´t hear God speak to someone else, you can hear him only if you are being addressed" may be considered by a particular individual, for example Wittgenstein (Z 717), as grammatical, that is, as something which does not admit discussion and besides, supports to a large extent loads of his own customs and ideas, but another person can regard it as an empirical proposition because in his or her opinion it depends on divine will. In other words, someone can be uncertain where I am certain: Wittgenstein thought this is a fact of nature because concepts with fixed limits would involve a uniformity of behaviour (Z 374). From now on I shall talk about "individual grammatical propositions" whenever I refer to a grammatical proposition which can be understood but is not shared by the linguistic community in

question, that is, I shall always talk about "individual grammatical propositions" as opposed to a specific linguistic community.

In this paper I would like to pay attention to a specific kind of individual grammatical propositions, I mean, those individual grammatical propositions that show how some people are not able to see themselves in certain ways which all of us think they should have no problem to see themselves. To put an example, we can imagine the case of Bob. This head of the family studied economics a long time ago, but he has worked as a cook in burger bars since then. Bob meets his ex-mates from time to time. They have good jobs in banks and finance companies, but Bob works in a burger bar, is sixty, and knows he will never work as an economist: he knows it is too late. As time passed Bob felt more and more inferior to his ex-mates until the proposition "I am inferior to my ex-mates" became grammatical for him, that is, it became an individual grammatical proposition. Bob explains this point in numerical terms. As he says, nobody can doubt "4<8". So when "8<4" confronts him, he says the sign "<" has been misused; however, if Bob concentrates on the relation "8<x" when "8<4" confronts him, then he will not see "4" as the number four, but only as a scribble. In the same way Bob cannot see himself as equal or superior to his ex-mates: he would exclaim at most "But that´s not me! I can´t see myself in that picture! Can you imagine yourself taking an oil tanker on your shoulders? And don´t think of a cartoon, think of the ship!".

In this case the proposition in question has become a paradigm to judge experience only for a specific person; obviously there are millions and millions of persons who fortunately have not an inferiority complex, but there are many people undergoing this problem: in fact, anybody could have this complex. In spite of everything, if we thought Bob´s problem is limited to get flustered whenever he meets one of his ex-mates and nothing more, we would make the mistake G. Ryle (Ryle 1984, 44) highlighted several decades ago. As Ryle pointed out, there are many people "expecting dispositions to have uniform exercises": they think these are single-track dispositions, that is to say, they assume there is one-pattern intellectual processes in which these dispositions are actualised. But appearances can be deceptive: if we wished to unpack all that is conveyed by a dispositional concept, we should have to produce, as Ryle remarked, "an infinite series of different hypothetical propositions". Regarding Bob´s case, we can imagine easily that besides getting low marks in self-esteem tests, being pessimistic to face up to some tasks, etc, Bob often could repeat expressions of the kind of "I am a failure", "I have no right to be happy", "My wife will always be disappointed in me", … Thus far, however, all these points are common to ordinary inferiority complexes, but one of the distinguishing features of individual grammatical propositions is that individuals are prone to assimilate as grammatical another derived propositions too. So Bob can meet bankers and economists of whom he does not know whether they studied in the same university he finished his degree course: be that as it may, Bob will be prone to feel inferior to these bankers and economists as if they were his ex-mates; in the same way, Bob will be prone to feel inferior to another persons who have been successful in their professional careers, such as engineers, lawyers, physicians, etc. Bearing in mind that Bob assimilated these points as grammatical certainties, he would be prone also to consider "I am a failure", "I have no right to be happy", or "My wife will always be disappointed in me" as grammatical propositions. The mere fact that Bob cannot talk about or see himself as he could before this assimilation shows the great influence these propositions have on Bob.

Since "everything lies open to view" (PI 126), everybody can find out his own individual grammatical propositions attending to his own use of language. From this standpoint the result of philosophy is simple (cf. Z 452), but we are tempted to go further than we should. By the way, Wittgenstein warned us of one of the main difficulties in philosophy: "to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back" (OC 471). It is true the common frame reflects our own form of life, that is, the ungrounded activities we engage in, but I am afraid whoever tries to face his own philosophical problems often will have to be ready to find out the beginning in what I have called "individual grammatical propositions". So if we played down the variations allowed by grammar in the individual paradigms through which we confront experience, we would go against our own interests, but besides, if we played down those variations, we would not be doing justice to the man who said that working on philosophy is a working on oneself.

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