Beyond Relativism?
Re-engaging Wittgenstein

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1. The Problem

Relativism is the view that there are as many worlds as there are ways of thinking and expressing the worlds that are expressed. That is to say, things are related to the ways in which we express them. Thus philosophers assert that the way we express our thoughts in language even affects the way we perceive the world. Relativism is a reaction against the view that there is one and only one way of describing the world. Therefore, relativists argue that the different conceptual abilities and habits are liable to result in different ways of seeing the world.

Linguistic relativists advocate a theory that culture is closely related to language. Culture varies if language varies. They say that whatever men do may be conceived in their language, so there must be a correlation between their language and their activities. There is a deeper connection between their thought and language. It is true not only with reference to a particular sentence or a particular thought, but also with reference to the whole area of human intellectual activity. According to this view, it is absurd to say that there is only one reality or one world.

Cultural relativists, on the other hand, say that people may live differently according to their own life-styles. There is no one ultimate culture that everybody should follow. There are multiple cultural societies in the history of mankind, and each culture has its own rational law, order, etc.

Ontological relativists believe that reality is related to language. Our concept of the real is parasitic on our language. Different societies and cultures have different assumptions of reality. There is no one reality or one universal form that everybody should share. There are different realities depending upon various cultures, languages, etc.

In this essay, I shall discuss Wittgenstein's arguments against relativism. According to him, relativism cannot be sustained at a transcendental level, for there is commonness among cultures and languages through which communication and interaction is possible. He considers language in the broad sense as embodying universal concepts and rules. In his opinion, language is the only medium through which we can express our thoughts, feelings, etc. His notions of 'language-games' and `forms of life' imply that, in spite of the apparent diversity, there are universal features of language and forms of life. We have different kinds of language-games, but there is a common structure among them. Language-games belong to a family where there must be some similarity or resemblance among them. Language, in the narrow sense, does not interest Wittgenstein. Therefore there is a universal and absolutist dimension to Wittgenstein's idea of language and forms of life.

2. Logic, Language and Conceptual Scheme

According to Wittgenstein, there is a definite structure underlying the world - the structure of language and the world that is the manifest concern of analytic philosophy. He writes:

Logic pervades the world; the limits of the world are also its limits. So we cannot say in logic `the world has this in it, and this, but not that'. For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case, since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of the world; for only in that way could it view those limits from the other side as well. We cannot think what we cannot think; so we cannot think what we cannot say either.[1]

We grow up with language as we grow up with the ability to walk or run. Language is the only source of our thinking. We can explain, describe or do something only through language. Language and world are intimately related. In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein established that the "limits of my language means the limits of my world". There is, therefore, a necessary relation between language (picture) and reality so that we can understand the structure of the world through language. Thus, there is a determinate structure of truth and meaning which language embodies. The world has a structure of objects and states of affairs. Logic shows the underlying structure of language and the world.

The metaphysics of *Tractatus* contains the absolutist idea that there is a logical structure of language and reality. All languages must share the same structure, which is the structure of the world as well. Thus logic is the central focus of Wittgenstein's idea of conceptual scheme. His later philosophy, as Bernard Williams[2] points out, does not disown this idea. The logical structure of language continues to be the focus of our understanding of language-games and forms of life. That is why Wittgenstein does not allow the multiplicity of language-games and forms of life to dissolve the unity of logic. Williams has pointed out that there is a transcendental[3] dimension to the Wittgensteinian idea of logic, since logic always determines the limits of language and the world. The conceptual scheme embedded in logic tells us what are the possible language-games and the possible world-structures.

3. Wittgenstein on Relativism

Relativism has been widely accepted by many modern and postmodern philosophers. It has taken different dimensions in the philosophy of science, culture and language. The fact that Wittgenstein has related language to the forms of life of the people in his later philosophy may make him appear as a relativist. Williams

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[1] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus,* 5.61.
[2] Williams, *Moral Luck*, p.146.
[3] Ibid.

rules out relativism in Wittgenstein's philosophy in the following passage:

It seems to me that both the nature of view, and the nature of the later Wittgenstein material, makes it hard to substantiate any unqualified claim of that kind.[4]

Wittgenstein has not propounded relativism at all. We can argue that the truth of a proposition is always relative to some language. But this will be a trivial thesis since truth must belong to some language or other. So, cognitive universalism can be established with regard to truth. The argument that truth is relative to specific culture and language is not a serious one. Such cultural and linguistic relativism makes a very poor understanding of language.[5]

Cultural relativism suggests that both language and knowledge are relative to cultures. It further claims that truth is relative to culture. That is, categories and concepts are not dictated either by nature or by reason, but they result from social negotiation and conventions. Therefore concepts vary from culture to culture. Such conceptual differences are a matter of empirical research.[6]

Cultural relativism has found support in the study of human language. Whorf and his followers have propounded that grammars contain metaphysical theories, predetermining the contents of thought as well as forms of expression. The grammar of different languages leads people to have fundamentally different world-views. In the words of Whorf:

The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas.... Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly too greatly, due to different grammars.[7]

The argument arising from conceptual and grammatical differences as outlined by Whorf suggests that the perception of the external world is relative to grammar. It also leads to the conclusion that language determines our experience of the world. From this follows a kind of linguistic relativism, which tells us that as there are many languages, so there are many world-views.

Relativism, however, is not philosophically satisfactory. It is absurd to accept the Whorfian Hypothesis. If relativism is true, there will be no universal truth or universal logic. Relativism makes us accept different worlds, but, in fact, there are no other worlds than the world we know.[8] We can only imagine different kinds of worlds very different from the one we know. But these would be imaginary worlds, not alternative to the actual world.

The narrow empirical sense of language is always defective. In a philosophical sense we can talk of language as such. It is the latter idea of language that is relevant in this context. That is what is universal from the logical point of view.

The narrow sense of language 'seems' to explain the variations in world-views among the different linguistic groups. In this sense each linguistic group has a form of life of its own. Thus the difference in world-views can be accounted for in terms of the interests of the linguistic groups.[9] Wittgenstein writes:

For here life would run on differently.... What interests us would not interest *them*. Here different concepts would no longer be unimaginable. In fact, this is the only way in which *essentially* different concepts are imaginable.[10]

4. Commensurability of World-pictures

Wittgenstein, in *On Certainty*, develops the conception of a world-picture[11], which is integrated into the concept of language-games and forms of life. Wittgenstein's idea is that a world-picture contains the concepts through which we understand the world. It is a kind of mythology,[12] which contains the basic category of understanding the world. It is a way of seeing the world, i.e., a weltanschauung. Wittgenstein says that our language embodies this world-picture uniquely and absolutely. There are no alternatives to it, though other ways of seeing the world are quite imaginable. Wittgenstein encourages such imagination. The different world-pictures are accessible to each other, since they are only extensions of our world-view and are not alternatives in the real sense. The different imaginable world-pictures are commensurable with one another. We can understand them well from within our world-pictures.

Our world-picture is not chosen or constructed by ourselves. It is not based on reasoning. It is something given to us in a fundamental sense. Wittgenstein says:

I do not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.[13]

Our language-games and forms of life are absolutely acquired. As Williams points out, the grammar of our language-games cannot be justified, and that the language-games are not reasonable or unreasonable, but are there like our life.[14] Wittgenstein, therefore, suggests that there is nothing right or wrong about language-games or forms of life. He writes:

Suppose we met people who did not regard that (sc. the propositions of physics) as a telling reason. Now, how do we imagine this? Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle. (And for that we consider them primitive.) Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it? If we call this `wrong' aren't we using our language-game as a base from which to *combat* theirs?[15]

But from this it does not follow that there are different world-pictures, which are inaccessible to one another. The various linguistic groups exist only in an empirical sense. But logically there is one world-picture and one linguistic community. This entails that the limits of our language determine the limits of our world. Our language is not a group-language, but that of the entire human community. It is not an empirical truth, but grammatical or, as Williams claims, a transcendental truth.[16]

[4] Ibid., p. 153.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Barre, *The Human Animal*, pp. 176-177; Barnes and Bloor, 'Relativism, Rationalism, and the Sociology of Knowledge' in Hollis and Lukes (ed.) *Rationality and Relativism*, pp. 38if.
[7] Whorf, *Language Thought and Reality*, (ed.) J. B. Carroll, pp. 221-223.
[8] Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense, An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 15.

[9] Williams, *Moral Luck*, pp. 144-163.
[10] Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, (tr.), sect. 388.
[11] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, (tr.), sect. 95.
[12] Ibid., Sect. 195.
[13] Ibid., Sect. 94.
[14] Williams, 'Wittgenstein and Idealism' in *Moral Luck*.
[15] *On Certainty*, sect. 609.
[16] Williams, 'Wittgenstein and Idealism', pp. 156-157. *On Certainty*, Sect. 609.

There are two senses in which we can talk about language and world-picture, the narrow (empirical) sense and the wider (non-empirical or transcendental) sense. In the narrow sense, we belong to small groups. In a wider perspective, we belong to the larger humanity. It is in the latter sense that we can discuss our language and world. Therefore, whatever appears as other forms of life is really part of our form of life. The other forms of life are understood only within our form of life. Thus there is no other form of life in the absolute sense.[17]

The so-called different world-views are the functions of our world-view. Socially it can be called "aggregate solipsism".[18] This overcomes the threat of relativism. The only option left is that we have a unique conceptual scheme. The other schemes are part of this scheme.[19]

5. Absolutism

The question arises as to whether we are really thinking at all in terms of actual groups of human beings and their incommensurable forms of life and world-views. The answer is 'no'; we are not concerned so much with the epistemology of different world-views, and still less with the methodology of the social sciences, as with the basic structures thereof.

Imagined world-views are certainly not real. They are the ways the world could be conceived. Alternatives are, therefore, not the sort of empirically actual alternatives. As William says, "the imagined alternatives are not alternatives to us, they are alternatives for us..."[20] Our imagination must have a limit, which it cannot transcend. Imagined worlds are really a part of our world.

We all must agree that behind the imagined world-views and forms of life, there are the forms of life given to us. They are absolutely real and true. We need no justifications or explanation for them. They are logically true. However we cannot exclude the possibility of other language-using creatures whose picture of the world might be different from ours. But that does not imply that there are really inaccessible world-views and forms of life other than our own.

If we accept the relativity of language and forms of life, then communication or interaction becomes impossible. If we understand others' activity and communicate with them, then other forms of life surely belong to us. Thus our forms of life are absolutely real, and we have a universal world-view to share with. As Williams says:

Leaving behind the confused and confusing language of relativism, one finds oneself with a *we* which is not one group rather than another in the world at all, but rather the plural descendant of that idealist *I* who also was not one item rather than another in the world.[21]

So again we come back to the *Tractatus* dictum: "The limits of my language mean limits of my world". Here we can easily move from 'my' to 'our', so those limits of our language mean limits of our world. This transcendental idea of the first person plural cannot be ruled out. This 'we' includes all 'we' (groups). Thus absolutism of a sort emerges out of Wittgenstein's conception of language, life and the world.

In this essay, I have pleaded for absolutism from Wittgenstein's points of view. 'Absolutism' is here that I have taken in a very moderate sense. For Wittgenstein, there is a universal conceptual scheme underlying our thought, language and reality.

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[17] cf. Ibid., p. 158.
[18] Ibid., p.158.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., p. 160.