

NORMATIVITY WITHOUT RULES

Francesco Zucchini (Sapienza)

francescozucchini.com

Hans-Johann Glock, “Unruly Wittgensteinians” (2024):

Cavell (1962) pioneered readings of Wittgenstein which I call ‘unruly’. Their common denominator is that they disparage, downplay or substantially qualify Wittgenstein’s talk of languages and meaning as constituted by logico- syntactical or ‘grammatical rules’

(Glock, *Normativity, Meaning, and Philosophy*, p.223)

Is this account correct?

1. The ‘standard’ reading of Wittgenstein on rules and language

- The problem of skepticism cannot be stated, for it violates the rules of grammar.
- Wittgenstein’s later philosophy aims at unveiling the philosophical misunderstandings of ordinary language:

Though we do pay attention to the way we talk about these matters, we don’t understand it, but misinterpret it. When we do philosophy, we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the way in which civilized people talk, put a false interpretation on it, and then draw the oddest conclusions from this.

(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §194).

- Peter Hacker: it is only from a perspicuous representation of the grammar of ordinary language that «one can achieve a firm understanding of the bounds of sense and see what is awry with philosophical questions and their typical answers» (*Insight and Illusion*, p.152).
- The skeptic misunderstands a grammatical remark for a deep philosophical truth.

2. Cavell the Unruly Wittgensteinian

- The ‘standard’ reading is “ironically blind”: «it is not merely wrong, but misses the fact that Wittgenstein’s ideas form a sustained and radical criticism of such views» (Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”, in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p.44).
- Ordinary language «does not, in fact or in essence, depend upon such a structure and conception of rules» (Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”: 45).

Why?

- a) The analogy with games shows that rule-governed activities need not be “everywhere bounded by rules” (*PI* §68).
- b) Rule-following is itself a normative practice:

“following a rule” is an activity we learn against the background of, and in the course of, learning innumerable other activities – for example, obeying orders, taking and giving directions, repeating what is done or said, and so forth.

(Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”, p. 45)

- c) Being a normative practice, it has standards of correctness: «it can be done correctly or incorrectly – which just means it can be done or not done» (p.46).
- d) The correctness or incorrectness of rule-following cannot be explained in terms of rules, because rule-following is precisely what we wanted to explain.
- e) Therefore, rules cannot be the absolute foundation to our normative *criteria* that philosophers want them to be.

- For Cavell, the concept of criteria is more helpful in making sense of normativity:

Criteria are appealed to in the course of grammatical investigations, and it is grammar which tells what kind of object anything is.

(Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p.16).

[Criteria] are supposed to be the means by which the existence of something is established with certainty ... [or] specifications a given person or group sets up on the basis of which (by means of, in terms of which) to judge (assess, settle) whether something has a particular status or value

(Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 6-9).

- Is this sufficient to answer the skeptic? No. What the skeptic doubts is precisely the validity of normal criteria.
- The appeal to criteria is not a confutation of skepticism. Rather, the investigation of criteria reveals “the truth of skepticism”: that nothing ensures that our projections will take place.
- Criteria make language normative, without appealing to some independent and eternal foundation (as the philosophical image of rules). Language is not completely arbitrary – because it is possible to appeal to criteria and grammar – but its normativity does not rest on impersonal rules.
- Normativity rests on *attunement*. But attunement can be lost at any moment: «a given person or group (a “tribe”) might *not* share our criteria» (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p.18).

3. From Language to Ethics

3.1. Skepticism and Acknowledgment

- The problem of skepticism with respect to other minds – that a human being can be a total enigma to another – is not an epistemological problem but a moral fact:

A ‘failure to know’ might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A ‘failure to acknowledge’ is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a blank.

(Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love”, in *Must We Mean What We Say?* pp.263-4)

- Acknowledging the other person’s pain does not imply two separate moments:
 - (i) factual knowledge of the presence of pain in the other;
 - (ii) moral knowledge of (the rules of) how to react to their pain.

- A different picture of morality: not a system of obligations, but a field of responsiveness, of openness and closure to others.

3.2. Moral Perfectionism

- Another reformulation of moral normativity, with respect to our relation to ourselves: there is always a further self, an unattained but attainable version of who I am, that exerts a moral pull on my present self.
- Not the pull of a moral law or rule, but an internal sense of a possibility.

[Moral perfectionism] is not a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that ... concerns what used to be called the state of one's soul, a dimension that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and one's society

(Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p.2).

- Who am I becoming? What kind of self am I in the process of making? No rule or principle, however refined, can answer that question.
- The moral work is on one's self, but not in isolation [A connection between (3.1) and (3.2)?]

4. Conclusion: Unruly Normativity

- Morality and moralism:

[the] insistence on right and wrong as the touchstones of assessment represents another attempt to meet an academic distrust of morality by an academic moralism.

(Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy", p.51)

- Normativity does not require a foundation outside of the practices themselves.
- Glock is right in calling Cavell the "unruly": his philosophy resists the distorting order that philosophical theories impose on reality, bringing morality and language back to the rough ground of our lives.