An approach to Wittgenstein's antirealism*

Antoni Defez
Universitat de Girona (España)

Abstract

This article intends to analyze, in general, the romantic roots of Wittgenstein thought and, specifically, what could have been the position of Wittgenstein, especially the second Wittgenstein, on the philosophical problem of the language-reality relationship. No doubt it is a bold exercise, since Wittgenstein did not openly deal with this question, and would have considered it nonsense. However, its elucidation- the idea that Wittgenstein was committed to antirealism- seems to make his conception of language more understandable, and in particular how private languages would not be possible.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, language, reality, antirealism, private language.

Una aproximación al antirrealismo de wittgenstein

Resumen

Este artículo pretende analizar la probable posición de Wittgenstein –sobre todo el segundo Wittgenstein– respecto del problema filosófico de la relación lenguaje-realidad. Sin duda, se trata de ejercicio atrevido, ya que Wittgenstein no se ocupó de esta cuestión abiertamente y la habría considerado un sinsentido. Sin embargo, su dilucidación –la idea que Wittgenstein estaba comprometido con el antirrealismo– parece hacer más comprensible su concepción del lenguaje, y en particular cómo no serían posibles los lenguajes privados

Palabras clave: Wittgenstein, lenguaje, realidad, antirrealismo, lenguaje privado.

I read: "...philosophers are no nearer to the meaning of 'Reality' than Plato got...".
What a strange situation. How extraordinary that Plato could have got even as far as he did! Or that we could not get any further! Was because Plato was so extremely clever?
Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Big Typescript.

In this lecture my concern is to rethink some central strands of Wittgenstein's philosophy, and so better understand what kind of philosopher he was. In particular I will focus on three issues: the way in which he could have seen the language-reality relationship; his conception of human beings, that is, his philosophical anthropology; and finally the role that authenticity plays in his thought. Likewise, I will emphasise that these subjects reveal some romantic roots in his thought... I am conscious that this task is perhaps risky and overbold. Wittgenstein was not a philosopher in a traditional sense nor a thinker with only one philosophy -how many Wittgensteins existed is an open question-, and therefore it does not seem possible to draw an outline of his thought without betraying in some sense his style and maybe his intentions.

That Wittgenstein was not a traditional philosopher is easy to see if we consider his conception of philosophy. Although he did not always understand language and his philosophical work in the same way, he always saw philosophy as an analysis of language pursuing only transparency or clarity: a perspicuous sight without philosophical knowledge, without theses. The famous last aphorism of the *Tractatus* expresses this perfectly: *"What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence"*. The silence of the wise -not the silence of the ignorant-, the silence of those that know how language works, and know thereby what can and cannot be said meaningfully... In the end an ideal, an impossible silence, because human beings tend to be dissatisfied with language and run constantly against the rules, against the barriers of language.

On the other hand, Wittgenstein did not write books of philosophy in a traditional sense, that is, discursive explanations or demonstrative expositions. No, just as Joyce's *Ulysses* is not a novel -a story is always an idealization, a falsification of life- but an encounter of different formless streams of consciousness, so Wittgenstein's works, including the preparatory notebooks of his more architectural *Tractatus*, look like a stream of live thoughts, and over time an inconclusive recollection of examples, counterexamples, perplexities, contradictions, that is, a crossroads. Obviously both Joyce and Wittgenstein produced thoughtful works -not automatic or spontaneous writings-, and their styles are very meaningful: they showed what the experience of thinking -and life- actually is, apart from the more or less conventional reconstructions such as a story, a narrative or a discourse.

As I have previously said, it is not possible to draw an outline of Wittgenstein's philosophy and at the same time not betray in some sense his style and maybe his intentions. We have to go beyond where he went: we are doomed to interpret his intentions in a more or less discursive way. Thus, it is not surprising that the significance and status of his work has constantly been surrounded by disagreement. For instance, recently it has become fashionable to see Wittgenstein as a post-metaphysical thinker. This approach holds that both the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* are ironical books, self-defeating exercises that do not produce conclusions. Not books of philosophy at all, but prominent examples of the impossibility of any philosophical knowledge.

In my opinion, one of the merits of this view is that it points out or uncovers a tension in the meaning and value of Wittgenstein's work. Wittgenstein was a tormented, I mean, a very committed thinker, as we can see in this aphorism of 1944 included in *Culture and Value*: *"Thoughts that are at peace. That's what someone who philosophizes yearns for"*. The idea is also present in the *Philosophical Investigations*: *"The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to"* (#133). And that is the question: What was the upshot of philosophy for him? A perspicuous sight -the philosophically correct one- or merely that his thoughts are at peace? And are not these two possibilities the same thing?

Not necessarily. It is possible to achieve the perspicuous sight because we have a philosophical ladder, though we have to throw it away after we have climbed up it because it is a nonsensical ladder. Or it is possible to reach peace therapeutically by means of examples and counterexamples that make us see things from a quiet, non-metaphysical point of view. In the first case, if we do not accept any ironical purport, we can still speak of correctness -a nonsensical correctness that produces an illuminating nonsense-, although in the end this correctness is useless. In the Preface of the *Tractatus*, after declaring that he has solved all problems, Wittgenstein says that the value of his book is that *"it shows how little is achieved when the problems are solved"*. Effectively, how little is achieved about the way in which we have to live

our lives -I mean, the question of authenticity-, when philosophical problems are solved.

In turn, as is suggested by the second of these paths, it is possible that the language game of philosophy does not hold any privilege, and the only thing we can do is to unmask any attempt to play it, that is, therapy. But what does "unmask" mean here? In order to unmask anything, do not we need some criterion of correctness, that is, some transcendental approach? Wittgenstein said in 1931 that he only invented new similes, and that the preference for certain similes can be called a matter of temperament (see CV, pp: 19, 20). New similes, new pictures, new ways of looking at things... But what is a good simile or a good picture? And is our temperament the last word? No, Wittgenstein in 1949 suggests a very different answer: *"a picture which is at the roots of all our thinking"* (CV, p: 83), that is, a good picture -the philosophically correct one- is a picture that is embedded in our linguistic action and form of life.

Well, it is not my concern here to analyse in detail the nature and status of Wittgenstein's philosophy. However the above remarks can help us in relation to the issues of this lecture: Wittgenstein would not only be promoting pictures -the good philosophical pictures, of course-, but those pictures that satisfy his temperament and that makes him capable of stopping doing philosophy when he wants to... Particularly, with regard to the problem of the language-reality relationship -the first question I will address- my intention is to ascribe to him an antirealist attitude -an antirealist picture. In my view, it is possible to interpret Wittgenstein's aims as the effort to dismantle the unsatisfactory picture of metaphysical realism and specifically the metaphysical realism that lies beneath what he himself called "the modern conception of the world", that is, scientism and the idea of progress (see T, 6.371).

In an idealised way we can display metaphysical realism in two theses:

(i) Reality exists by itself, and it is structured in objects, properties and facts in a way that is indifferent to our epistemic relationship to them, that is, objects, properties and facts that self-identify.

(ii) There is or might exist a knowledge -or does not exist, or might not exist- that is the knowledge of reality itself, that is, a unique knowledge capable of reproducing reality itself in a true and complete way.

This is the skeleton, the mannequin that after we may dress with different clothes: common-sense realism,

essentialism, scientific realism, noumenic realism, critical realism, etc. And also radical scepticism and radical relativism that propose that *nothing goes* or that *anything goes*. The difference in this casuistry depends on the way we interpret the thesis (ii). For instance, if the knowledge of reality is a human possibility -an actual, future or ideal possibility-, or whether it is not a human possibility, but a possibility for another kind of being -god, the angels. Or even if it is an absolute impossibility for any kind of being.

However the picture is not complete yet: theses (i) and (ii) need some additional theses. In particular, an intellectualist view of human beings; the idea that knowledge is discovery, and truth is correspondence; and finally the assumption of semantic realism. And it is easy to understand how these presuppositions work: you suppose that knowledge is the essential activity for humans because they are, in essence, rational beings; you suppose that knowledge discovers and reproduces reality; and suppose that it is possible because the words -or at least the more crucial words- in which knowledge is articulated stand for the constituents of reality... Thus metaphysical realism tends to a special view of philosophy -the dominant one in our tradition-, namely, to explain how reality itself is, how knowledge and isomorphism between language and reality are possible, and explain what correspondence consists of. Or, if we were radical sceptics, radical relativists or noumenic realists, to explain how nothing of this kind is possible.

Now, why should we see things in this way? Is not metaphysical realism a nonsensical or misleading picture? Does it make sense to talk about reality itself and the knowledge of reality itself? It is possible to see metaphysical realism as a view that rests on the heart-warming belief that the intellect and knowledge -human or not- has some relevant metaphysical status: in particular, that reality -reality itself- is in essence knowable, something to be known by men or another kind of intelligent being. However, as F. Nietzsche emphasised in *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* (1873), that is only a prejudice -an arrogant and pathetic anthropomorphism-, because the intellect has no further mission beyond human life.

All right, let us leave out this bias, and the concept of reality itself as well. Or as Wittgenstein would say, let us return the word "reality" to its current usage, and restore its everyday uses. Why should this word have any philosophical privilege? Let us treat it as we treat, for instance, the word "lamp" (see PI, #97). Yet, the solution cannot be so easy: in fact, there is not any philosophical problem -I guess- with the word "lamp", but there are

a lot of problems with the word "reality". According to Wittgenstein, philosophical problems are consequence of a miscomprehension of the rules of language, but they are not mere technical mistakes. They are also an expression of our metaphysical dissatisfaction with the current rules of words. Just for this reason, and because of its persuasive profundity as well, we feel bewildered by them.

Moreover, philosophical problems have another important peculiarity. They are resistant and recurrent: like diseases that have not been cured, they can reappear at any time. And so, even if we decide to abandon the concept of reality itself, it is possible that the problem will reappear again -maybe in a concealed way- when we consider, for instance, the existence of the things we are talking about, or when we are talking about the regularities we observe, or when we say that our statements are true... The problem of realism, I mean, will be not dissolved with a simple return to everyday language, and maybe we will need to say something about it: in fact, something in a non-Wittgenstenian style that may however clarify Wittgenstein's intention.

Renouncing the concept of reality can mean two distinct things: renouncing every concept of reality, or only renouncing the concept of reality itself. The results are very different ones. If we follow the first path we will arrive at irrealism, linguistic idealism, or fictionalism. On the contrary, if we follow the second route we arrive at antirealism, I mean, antirealist realism -internal or pragmatic realism, as H. Putnam calls it-, an antirealism that is not an irrealism -an antirealism with a small "a"-, a kind of realism that is not metaphysical, but a realism only committed to the idea that reality is always the human spoken reality, and that it is nonsense to try to go further. In this respect, I think, what W. James said in 1907 in *Pragmatism* can help us.

Indeed, it is nonsense to try to go beyond our linguistic and epistemic praxis: it is not possible to describe or think reality apart from our manners of speaking and knowing: *"the trail of the human serpent is thus over everything"*. Anthropomorphism, yes, but a humble anthropomorphism -not the arrogant anthropomorphism of metaphysical realism. Reality is what happens, and so it behaves kindly or in opposition to what we say and do: reality is what makes our expectations true or false. In other words: resistance and goodness against isomorphism and truth as correspondence... This is a moral metaphor: what is relevant to our concepts and beliefs is that they work, describe the human spoken reality, overcome the tests of

facts, make predictions, etc., that is, that they are virtuous in the Greek sense of *arete*.

From this point of view knowledge would only be a plastic network of removable concepts and beliefs produced by the creative and imaginative activity of human beings for the sake of solving problems, and not a process of discovering the hidden secrets of reality itself. The moral metaphor thereby runs against the spatial metaphor of metaphysical realism -correspondence, isomorphism, penetration and uncovering. But, what does remain here of the concept of reality? Well, if we are still interested in a philosophical use of the word "reality", it would be equivalent to an ideal limit, a limit to our thought. In James's words: "*It is what is absolutely dumb and evanescent, the merely ideal limit to our minds. We can glimpse it, but we never grasp it; what we grasp is always some substitute for it which previous human thinking has peptonized and cooked for our consumption*" (see Ch.VII).

Far from the spatial metaphor of metaphysical realism, reality is not something in front of us, or in front of another possible subject: it is only an ideal limit. It is not a something, but not a nothing either. A limit to our thought: we cannot dispense with it, and at the same time we cannot think it -more anthropomorphism, but a humble and silent anthropomorphism. A limit, but not a dead limit. No, reality is not only what happens, but the happening of what happens, and in this sense a pressure, a coerciveness too: reality exerts kindness or opposition -pressure- on our concepts and beliefs. And this reality is a reality that is only possible to think from our manners of speaking and knowing. In fact, even the concepts of limit, pressure, coerciveness, kindness or opposition are human concepts -metaphors- as well. More anthropomorphism therefore.

Well, let us go back to Wittgenstein. In Section xii of Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations* and in *On Certainty* (see OC, #615) he seems to use a moral metaphor. Likewise we can find here the picture of a plastic network of certainties and concepts in which we live, and also the idea that reality -*"very general facts of nature"*- is what allows us to have the concepts and certainties we have. Wittgenstein says that other certainties and other concepts could be possible as well, and that ours are not the only possible ones, nor the metaphysically correct ones -it would be nonsense to talk about correctness here. Nevertheless neither whatever possibility would be possible.

It is easy to grasp the mature Wittgenstein's intention with the metaphor of pressure or coerciveness: reality -very general facts of nature- coerces without determining in

a causal sense. We cannot explain causally our concepts and basic certainties because others are possible -other concepts and other certainties might work as well. In other words: reality determines and at the same time underdetermines the existence of our concepts and certainties: for this reason other possibilities are possible, although not all possibilities are possible. And we must not forget that this reality is just the human spoken reality, and so those "very general facts of nature" are facts that only make sense to describe from our language and praxis, that is, the idea of reality as pressure is the idea of reality as limit. We have reached the bedrock where our spade is turned, and *we must pass over in silence*.

Again, according to Wittgenstein, as reality is always a human spoken reality, it is meaningless to speak or think about reality itself, and not because of some special reason -a human impotence or a peculiar elusiveness of reality. No, the problem is that there is no problem: there is nothing about which we can speak or think. At most, we can only glimpse the pressure -the kindness or resistance- of reality, the human spoken reality. As the young Wittgenstein said in the *Tractatus*, the fact that reality can be described by a particular system of description does not tell us anything about reality, *"but what does tell us something about it is the precise way in which it is possible to describe it by these means"* (T, #6.342).

Nothing about reality itself, but only about the way in which our language is arranged, including its a priori extensional structure and causal laws -causality does not proceed from extensionality: rather it is a way in which human beings shape propositions from their inductive natural tendencies. In other words: the kindness of reality does not show the metaphysical correctness of some system of description -this is the illusion of scientism; neither the metaphysical correctness of extensionality and causality. No, that reality can be described by language and the fact that some systems of description work better than others only shows the kindness of reality.

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein distinguishes the concept of reality (*Wirklichkeit*) from the concept of the world (*Welt*), that is, what is possible -the existence and non-existence of states of affairs- and what is the case, the facts (see T, #1-1.12 and #2.06). However, what is the case are not only the facts, but the happening of the facts. And about this happening we cannot speak, we must pass over in silence: it is an unthinkable limit that only shows its pressure or coerciveness. The happening of facts -the miracle of the existence of the world- and the view, the feeling of the world as a limited or necessary whole is the

mystical. However the mystical is not only a view or a feeling: it is also an attitude, an attitude of acceptance of facts -a religious attitude without religious beliefs-, and so an ethical attitude, a stoic attitude that only tries to alter the way in which the facts are lived. For this reason the world of the happy man is a different world from that of the unhappy, despite the fact that these worlds can be extensionally equivalents, that is, include the same facts (see T, #6.43-#6.45).

But let us come back to the idea that the word "reality" does not have any metaphysical privilege. As I have said, the problem is that, although we do not say anything about reality as a whole, it is possible that we need to talk about the reality of the things we speak about. Philosophers are very peculiar people: they agree that trees or pains exist, but they often are at odds about what it means to say that trees or pains exist. Do they exist by themselves or do they not exist at all? Or do they exist only insofar as someone knows them? And what should be our strategy in this case? Well it depends: each case is different and will need its own treatment -trees, pains, electrons or nations do not exist in the same way. Yet the following general approach is possible: it will never be meaningful to say in a metaphysical sense that something exists by itself, but *it only makes sense to say* that something exists from our manners of speaking. Not that it exists "because of" but "from" our manners of speaking: for example, *it only makes sense to say* that trees or pains -the physical and the mental- exist from our manners of speaking.

But not only from our manners of speaking. Trees and pains are not linguistic realities: trees cast shadows and pains are painful. However, trees and pains are not, as semantic realism professes, in front of us in a metaphysical sense waiting to be named and labelled by our words; neither as causes of our behaviour. On the contrary, our behaviour is just what distinguishes, isolates and identifies the entities we speak about: our behaviour is not merely an answer to stimulus, but action -*quasi* symbolic natural action. And these natural actions and reactions, as the mature Wittgenstein suggests, are interwoven with our use of words in such a way that sometimes it is not easy nor possible to separate them. This is the case, for instance, of the expressive language of sensations, and in general what we might call the deep geological strata of language. And so we should say that *it only makes sense to say* that trees and pains exist from our manners of speaking and natural behaviour.

These natural actions and reactions make up, for Wittgenstein, the shared behaviour of mankind, the behaviour

in which human beings, as a matter of fact, tend to agree. It is the system of reference, the natural background -in fact, one of the very general facts of nature- that allows us to agree spontaneously in language, that is, to learn a language by training, understand each other, and understand other languages and other cultures. Our shared behaviour that is part of our natural history and the limit of whatever philosophical explanation -that is how human beings act. As we can see, there is no danger of linguistic idealism or radical relativism.

And for similar reasons ostensive definition cannot work, and a private language is impossible. In effect, the problem is that language, and specifically a private language might not even begin by means of ostensive definitions -not that the concept of correctness disappears with privacy, and that public rules or social agreement are necessary. In reality, Wittgenstein rejects the object-name model of semantic realism, not only because a private object -a private beetle- might not form part of a public language, but above all because *it does not make sense* to speak of sensations previously to our linguistic praxis -against semantic and metaphysical realism, sensations do not self-identify (see PI, #244, #257, #293 and #304). In other words: mental reality is not segmented by itself, but it is divided by means of the framework of our linguistic praxis and natural behaviour -our form of life. We have arrived again at the bedrock where our philosophical spade is turned -the insuperable anthropomorphism- and *we must pass over in silence*.

In ostensive definition, and also in following rules, it is easy to appreciate the wrong role played by intellectualism in metaphysical realism. Ostensive definition not only presupposes that the object exists by itself, but that this object is recognised and identified as this object by the learner before he or she is introduced to this object in language -an intellectual operation that cannot be applied to anything. Likewise in learning rules we do not intellectually grasp pre-existing rules, but rather our behaviour agrees with the praxis to which we are being introduced by training. And so we might say that rules are created and recreated by the activities in which humans converge. Humans beings are intelligent, but they are not intelligences. In this sense, in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein says: *"I want to regard man here as an animal, as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state: Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination"* (OC, #475).

Not intelligences, nor selves. Otherwise, the sense in which philosophy can talk about the subject in a non-metaphysical way is as human beings or, better, as human activity. But not the transcendental activity which the *Tractatus* spoke about; neither an activity explicable by science in a causal sense. No, for the mature Wittgenstein, human beings are spontaneous, expressive, creative, inductive, intentional, symbolic and ritual beings... Human beings more or less contingently produce languages, intentional realities, horizons of sense, values, etc., that are transmitted, modified and enriched from generation to generation. And this kind of activity -creativity- is just what philosophy is interested in. Or, is it by chance that Wittgenstein used the concept of game -language games- for describing the nature of the human linguistic activities?

Human beings are animals that play -not the only ones, of course-, and live situated in groups, communities, traditions, landscapes... And we have arrived at the point where we are able to distance ourselves from our original locations and so embrace different and more widespread horizons of sense. To create distance, yes, but not to lose our original location. Wittgenstein was not a cosmopolitan nor a universalist. The space of reasons exists, but far from whatever metaphysical optimism -human beings are artists, but this means nothing in a moral sense- the human situation is, in the end, conflict, and when reasons are finished we will only dispose of persuasion: everyone will assert his own justifications or his moral images (see OC, #612).

However human beings do not only play, they are also animals that live searching for themselves: individualism is one of the tendencies of our process of humanization and form of life. And so, one of the most acute questions for us is "who am I?", or "who do I want to be?", or maybe in a more ancient form "how should I live?". These questions are not equivalents to "what kind of entity am I?" and "how can I know that I am the same entity over time?" These last questions -typical of metaphysical realism- presuppose that human beings are substances, and would have created the problem of personal identity as the problem of the identity of a substance. On the contrary, the former questions point to the personal self-creation and authenticity as the most relevant problems, and suggest that human beings are or live as existences, lives, and not substances.

Wittgenstein devoted very little time to personal identity -some passages of *The Blue Book* and the *Philosophical Investigations* (see PI, #404)-, and was always against the metaphysical paradigm of an absolute identity. In his

opinion there is a great variety of contextual criteria for the identity of a person, and that invites us to think that he saw people as social and narrative constructions with an inconclusive identity of degree: existences, lives, concerned with their personal self-creation and authenticity. In this sense, the last paragraphs of the *Tractatus* about ethics, sense of life and the mystical, and a great deal of the material of his personal notebooks, show clearly how authenticity -sincerity- was an inescapable question for him. And the urgency of this questioning and the answer -pessimism and stoicism- are not independent of his disquietude or restlessness towards the modern conception of the world: the spirit of the main current of European and American civilization, that is, scientism and the idea of progress.

But we must finish. At the beginning we promised that we would present some romantic roots in Wittgenstein's thought, and now we can deliver them: in my view, they are precisely the pictures of antirealism, human spontaneity, creativity, personal self-creation and authenticity that we find in his works. Even in his antirealism -the rest are well known romantic topics- is possible to discover a romantic footprint. It is true that the Romantics still thought reality in terms of metaphysical realism as an undifferentiated and non-rational activity, power or will that underlies the phenomena; and that they invoked aesthetic intuition, feeling or music as the best knowledge of reality itself. However the bankruptcy of rationalism and scientism -mechanism- that these views exhibit are, I think, the background of the Wittgenstenian antirealism.

References

James, W. (1947). *Pragmatism. A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co.

Nietzsche, F. (1976). *The Portable Nietzsche*. London: Peguin Books.

Wittgenstein, L. (1961). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Putnam, H. (1981). *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge University Press.

Putnam, H. (1987). *The Many Faces of Realism*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court.

Putnam, H. (1988). *Representation and Reality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On Certainty*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. (1980) *Culture and Value*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.