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Blind Obedience

MARTIN GUSTAFSSON

1. Introduction

In a discussion of Wittgenstein's relation to the pragmatist tradition, Sami Pihlström (2012) criticizes what he calls "dichotomous" interpretations of Wittgenstein's thought. According to such interpretations, Wittgenstein defends one of two sides in a series of antithetical pairs: "propositional" vs. "non-propositional" conceptions of certainty, "anti-Cartesian fallibilism" vs. "the truth in skepticism", "metaphysics" vs. "criticism of metaphysics", and "therapeutic" vs. "systematic" philosophy. Pihlström argues that such dichotomies foist upon Wittgenstein precisely the sort of schematic simplifications that his philosophy is meant to undermine.

In this paper, I will look at yet another dichotomy that is often allowed to shape readings of Wittgenstein, namely, that between action and thought. According to Russell Goodman, Wittgenstein defends "the priority of practice over intellect" and this supposedly shows his affinity with pragmatist philosophers (Goodman 2002, quoted by Pihlström 2012, 4). Now, I do not want to deny that there are passages in Wittgenstein's writings that can be used to support such an interpretation. Indeed, I would even admit that there is a sense in which it captures an important and genuinely Wittgensteinian point. However, insofar as the alleged priority of practice over intellect is construed in such a way that "practice" is seen as a separately conceivable, "non-intellectual" foundation for intellectual phenomena, I think we should be skeptical towards the idea that such a priority claim can be found in Wittgenstein's work. Rather, the alleged dichotomy between practice and intellect is ultimately one that Wittgenstein would want to dissolve. According to him, making adequate sense of the notions of practice and

intellect requires that we acknowledge their mutual interdependence, rather than conceive their relation in terms of some one-directed priority.

Within a short paper such as this, I can provide no satisfactory exegetic or systematic defense of this reading. Instead, I will simply discuss an example in order to gesture at what I think such a defense would involve. My study case is the practice of issuing and obeying orders. This is no peripheral case for Wittgenstein, but plays a central role in the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is present already in the famous example of the builders in §2, and is repeatedly discussed throughout the so-called “rule-following considerations”. Indeed, Wittgenstein explicitly says that “Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order” (§209), so it is clear that he takes the case of ordering and obeying an order to be of considerable philosophical importance.

In §219, he writes:

All the steps are really already taken” means: I no longer have any choice. The rule, once stamped with a particular meaning, traces the lines along which it is to be followed through the whole of space.—But if something of this sort really were the case, how would it help me?

No, my description made sense only if it was to be understood symbolically. – I should say: *This is how it strikes me.*

When I follow the rule, I do not choose.

I follow the rule *blindly*.

This is one of those passages that are tempting to use in support of a reading according to which Wittgenstein thinks practice is one-directionally prior to intellect. Indeed, the final sentence of the passage may seem to lend support to straightforwardly anti-intellectualist interpretations, according to which Wittgenstein holds that some sort of pre-conceptual, animal, bare stimulus-response pattern of reactions constitutes the basic stratum of language use. My aim in what follows is to question such readings, by clarifying what the relevant sort of “blindness” can reasonably be taken to amount to.

2. The Nature of Blind Obedience

Suppose I order someone, "Stand up!", in response to which she stands up. What happens? Well, different things might occur. One possibility is that her action is preceded by deliberation. Perhaps her English is very rudimentary, and she needs a couple of seconds to remind herself of what my words mean before she acts. Or, perhaps she engages in critical reflection, pondering if she should really obey my order or not, before she decides to stand up after all. However, it is also quite possible that her obedience is immediate, unreflective: on hearing my order she simply stands up, without any prior deliberation.

There is a familiar temptation to assume that such immediate obedience cannot be fully immediate after all. For it may seem that if her standing up is really an instance of her *obeying my order* (rather than a bare reflex response to the noises that I produce), then she must *understand* the order before she acts upon it; and this understanding is a form of "mediation" which forges a necessary link between my ordering and her obeying it. Obedience is a self-conscious, intelligent action, and might therefore seem possible only if the sense of the order is appropriately grasped. The idea, then, is that only on the basis of such prior grasping is genuine obedience possible.

Wittgenstein of course questions the model suggested here, according to which "understanding" or "grasping" the order must always occur prior to actually obeying it. Certainly, he would agree that a prior process of understanding can sometimes occur, as in the case when the agent's English is so rudimentary that she must first remind herself of what the English words "Stand up!" mean. Suppose, for example, that the agent is a native Swedish speaker and that her action is preceded by her translating the order into Swedish, telling herself:

(S) Få se nu, 'stand' betyder väl 'stå' och 'up' betyder förstås 'upp', så han vill givetvis att jag ställer mig upp.

Only after she has told herself this Swedish sentence (S) will she stand up. In this case, the occurrence of (S) in the agent's

mind can rightly be said to forge a link between my issuing the order and the agent's obeying it.

What Wittgenstein questions is not that something like this can happen, but that it *must always* happen, even for example in the case of an agent whose mastery of English is quite perfect and who is not aware of going through any such conscious process of interpretation before she acts. Even with regard to such a case, there is a temptation to think that a prior process of understanding must occur, albeit a more ethereal and elusive one than in the case of the Swedish agent. Indeed, one might feel that a similar ethereal process must also occur in the case of the Swedish speaker, *in addition* to her telling herself the sentence (S) – for doesn't it remain to explain how she understands (S) itself? After all, just like my original order, (S) is just another string of words, and her understanding those words might seem no less in need of explanation than her understanding my order. The real understanding (the argument goes) cannot consist simply in being presented with a series of words, be they on public display or spoken silently by oneself "in the mind"; for those words must in turn be understood, and so the real understanding remains to be accounted for.

Having gotten this far in the dialectic, it becomes almost irresistible to think that what must ultimately happen in a process of "real" understanding is that some very special kind of item occurs before the speaker's mind – an internally and irreducibly meaningful item whose sheer presence somehow compels understanding, an item that guarantees its own correct uptake. One of Wittgenstein's central aims is to show how this notion of an item that cannot but be correctly understood dissolves under pressure. As Jason Bridges notes in a recent discussion of the rule-following considerations, this idea "falls apart under scrutiny. There is simply no making sense of the idea of an item, mental or otherwise, that 'logically' forces us to understand it in a particular way" (Bridges 2014, 278). "An item," Bridges continues:

cannot tell a person something unless she understands it to tell her that, and there is no getting around the fact that her understanding it this way is something she must bring to the table, not something that the item can itself provide for. (Bridges 2014, 278)

Consequently, understanding is no more guaranteed in the case in which an “irreducibly” or “non-contingently” meaningful item is what carries meaning and is present to the agent (whatever such an item would be).

So, what if we abandon the attempt to account for understanding in terms of such an ethereal process of understanding? What if we instead acknowledge that obeying an order can indeed be immediate, and that in such a case the understanding is not prior to but instead *consist in* the obedient action? Then aren't we reducing the obedient action to a bare reflex response, after all?

No. To see why, let us compare the two sorts of case. Thus, compare the case when someone immediately and spontaneously obeys the order “Stand up!” with the case when someone jumps to his feet in response to the sudden and unexpected roar “UARRGH!!”. The Wittgensteinian point is *not* that these two cases are similar. In the former case, there is genuine obedience in response to the content of the order: the person who stands up does *what she is ordered to do*. In the latter case, there is no obedience and no content, but only a brute reflex response. Suppose instead that the reflex response had been something completely different – a fainting-fit, say. This response would have been neither more nor less correct than standing up – it would simply be another response to the roar. In contrast to the order, the inarticulate roar invites no particular response (even if the intention of the one who roared might have been to achieve a certain effect).

But how can these two cases be distinguished, if we do not postulate a hidden process of understanding that occurs in the former case but not in the latter? According to Wittgenstein, this difference is to be accounted for by reference to a background of established linguistic practice mastered both by speaker and hearer, a practice to which the order “Stand up!” can be recognized as belonging. Given that the speaker and the hearer have already manifested their mastery of this practice again and again, we can in this particular case say that the order has content, and that it is understood and obeyed, without postulating any hidden process of understanding taking place behind the scenes. By contrast, in the case of the inarticulate roar, there is no such shared practice

to which the roar belongs. This is precisely what makes it *an inarticulate roar* (rather than an order) and the response a brute reflex response (rather than an instance of obedience).

It is crucial to see this difference between the two cases, for it has important further consequences. Again, obedience – even immediate, direct, unreflective obedience – requires the presence of a background linguistic practice. And a human linguistic practice is a resourceful institution. In particular, it provides the resources for reflection and criticism. Thus, if obedience – at least in its human form¹ – comes together with such resources, the upshot is that the possibility of obedience goes hand in hand with the possibility of critical reflection and disobedience. We can obey unreflectively – “blindly”, if you like – only if we have some resources to reflect, criticize and disobey.

On the other hand, it cannot be the case that disobedience would be the common response to an order. If so, the institution of ordering would be pointless: “Orders are sometimes not obeyed. But what would it be like if no orders were *ever* obeyed? The concept of an order would have lost its purpose” (Wittgenstein 2009, 345).

Even more significantly, disobedience is a “non-standard” response also in the sense that it requires some specific positive reason. Such a reason might be that obeying the order would be bad, or that obeying the order stands in conflict with some other instruction of overriding importance, or that one wants to undermine the authority of the order-giver, and so forth. Unless some such specific reason is present, it is not clear that the order has even been understood. By contrast, immediate obedience does not require any further positive reason to manifest understanding; for, again, such obedience typically constitutes the understanding of the order.

And yet, it would be completely mistaken to object that Wittgenstein somehow denigrates critical reflection and belit-

¹ I do not think it is an upshot of the Wittgensteinian conception that non-linguistic animals such as dogs cannot obey orders (if so, the conception would be obviously mistaken). However, I do think it entails that there is a formal difference between obedience among linguistic and non-linguistic animals. I cannot here clarify this point, but for discussions of related issues see Boyle 2012 and Gustafsson 2016.

ties the possibility of disobedience. According to his conception, in any given particular instance of ordering, critical reflection and disobedience may be called for. And when such critical reflection and disobedience takes place, there is indeed a distinction to be made between understanding and obedience: She who reflects critically before she obeys has surely understood the order, and the same is true of her who disobeys (rather than just misunderstands). But again, her understanding is not a matter of some hidden process in the mind, but is present *in* the way she discusses the order, weighs its pros and cons against each other, and so forth. And this in turn presupposes the background of a human linguistic practice in which she has shown himself to be a competent participant, *and* of a practice of ordering where orders are by and large obeyed.

Importantly, there are psychological differences between individual human beings. Some are more prone to reflection and criticism, whereas others have all too great respect for authority and obey orders unreflectively even when critical reflection is called for. It is certainly a good idea to try to reduce such an exaggerated and unreflective respect for authority – for example, by bringing up children in such a way that they don't obey blindly when there are good reasons to engage in critical reflection and perhaps even disobedience. The Wittgensteinian conception does not deny any of this. It merely clarifies the conditions that must be in place for meaningful discussions about the dangers of blind obedience to so much as get off the ground.

3. Conclusion

I hope my brief discussion of blind obedience has given the reader some idea of why I think we should be skeptical of a “dichotomous” reading of Wittgenstein according to which action and practice are in some one-directed fashion prior to thought and intellect. Even “blind obedience” and “blind rule-following” are pretty rich notions for Wittgenstein. They presuppose mastery of linguistic practice, and such mastery already provides the resources for deliberation and critical reflection. Thus, in an important sense, practice and intellect come together for Wittgenstein, and there is no reductionism

involved in this unity. In particular, Wittgenstein in no way reduces thought and intellect to some independently conceivable notion of “blind response”. What *is* true is that “blind” obedience (or rule-following), in the relevant sense of the term, has a kind of default status for Wittgenstein: it cannot generally be the case that agents deliberate before they act, and deliberation requires some specific positive reason. On the other hand, deliberation is always a possibility, and an agent incapable of critical reflection cannot act at all, not even “blindly”.

Finally, I don’t mean to suggest that this marks a distance between Wittgenstein and the classical thinkers in the pragmatist tradition. As far as I can judge, philosophers such as William James and John Dewey would heartily agree with virtually everything I have said on Wittgenstein’s behalf (neo-pragmatists such as Rorty are trickier – I personally suspect that Rorty’s views still suffer from a lingering reductionist behaviorism, even if I shall not try to justify this claim here). However, I gladly leave it to Sami to decide to what extent I am right about this affinity between pragmatist views and my Wittgenstein, since his knowledge of classical pragmatism far surpasses mine.

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