Realism and Imagination in Ethics

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21 Historical possibility of the breakdown of this expressive relationship. The problem of the meaning of life as a feature of the experience of those who live under social institutions which are devoid of expressive significance for them, and who therefore
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22 Moral ambiguity of such dissatisfaction. It has both progressive and reactionary connotations

23 The de facto connection between non-foundational epistemology and conservative attitudes: some examples

24 The sense in which that epistemology, and the expressivist view of language in general, does essentially contain an element of ‘conservatism’: according to expressivism, linguistic communication presupposes the existence of a practice which is not only (synchronously) shared, but (diachronically) continuous

25 Consequences of this idea for our conception of theoretical change over time. If we question too much at once, we cease to have a habitable world-view at all. The ‘argument from growing solitude’

26 However, a certain spurious conservatism is also apt to accrue to expressivist theories. Discussion of the suggestion that to reject fact/value or content/scheme dualism in favour of our proposed (Wittgensteinian) conception of language is to return to a ‘direct’ or ‘unmediated’ realism

27 These terms, as predicated of the proposed (post-empiricist) type of realism, are unobjectionable if they mean simply ‘non-inferential’ (in which case they would register, e.g., the fact that perceptual judgements were not construed by such a realism as inferences from sense-data). In another sense, however, the view we have been developing is precisely a mediated realism, since it requires us to acknowledge that the use of language is an activity in which we participate

28 But to gain a reflective awareness of the practical character of language is to come to see ourselves as morally implicated in our culture: ‘words are also deeds’ (Wittgenstein), and as such have a moral dimension. Our sittlich relation to the established language-game now becomes problematic

29-30 It may be objected that the logical freedom of a community to play any language-game it likes (a corollary of Wittgenstein’s considerations on rule-following) does not of itself justify us in labelling the individual as an accomplice of his culture, since we
have already noted the material obstacles to his living a life in defiance of that culture. Yet the idea of the historicity of our own particular form of life seems none the less to entail that any future ‘reintegration of subjective and objective standpoints’ on our part will have to be a critical reintegration – i.e. that we shall never again be able to participate ingenuously in any language-game unless we can regard it as rational (‘find ourselves in it’). The tension resolved by reference to the notion of ‘recessive formulae’ of rationality: deviant schemes of values which, while themselves grounded in the total form of life of a community, enable dissident individuals to sustain their identity as rational persons even though they may disengage themselves from the dominant institutions of that community. This situation arises out of the imperfect internal coherence of a social practice

31 Is the social world we actually inhabit such as to allow a reflective reintegration of subjective and objective standpoints? This (ethical) question gains urgency from our new insight into the role of coercion in sustaining all those forms of discourse which are regulated by the norms of truth and rationality.  

32 What is the relation between our idea of the immanent critique of a form of life, and the supposedly Wittgensteinian view that such forms do not lend themselves to evaluative comparison? The philosopher qua ‘describer of language-games’ can do no more than record the development and decay of specific configurations of intellectual authority. Examples of this kind of subject-matter: how social practices can ‘go off the rails’

33 It is certainly implicit in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy that any value-judgement concerning a form of life will necessarily be made from some definite historical standpoint, i.e. from within some world-view which is itself embedded in a historically specific form of life. (Denial of culture-transcendent values.)

34 But this ‘value-free’ account of the process of change in consensual norms might be held to suffer from the same phenomenological defect which was laid at the door of non-cognitivism, viz. refusal to acknowledge at the philosophical level those differences of objective value that we think we perceive in ordinary life. (Conflict between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ with respect to the idea of a ‘shared form of life which is constitutive of rationality itself’.)

35 The conflict resolved – and in a manner strongly reminiscent of
its resolution within non-cognitivism. (Our language-games display, but do not describe, the fact of our 'agreement in judgements'. The relation of consensus to critical concepts compared with that of pain-behaviour to pain-discourse.) This way of reintegrating subjective and objective standpoints will, however, prove innocent of the irrationalism which marred the non-cognitivist strategy, since it rests upon an expressivist conception of the whole of our discourse, not just of one area.

36 'Absolutism' versus 'relativism' with regard to confrontations between forms of life. Do rival belief-systems compete in respect of truth, or merely in respect of material dominance? This question forestalled by the expressivist idea that any extensive theoretical confrontation is also a practical confrontation, if it matters at all. Instances of such confrontation as seen (a) from the objective, (b) from the subjective standpoint.

37 The 'descent' from objectivity to subjectivity, or from mention to use of critical concepts. The 'trust' which ultimately characterizes our relation to any world-view within which we consent to operate. Role of this concept in Hegel, Wittgenstein and non-cognitivist ethical theory.

38 A topic in the 'linguistic phenomenology of dissent': the ironic or 'purely descriptive' use of value-terms. Its historical origins in non-aliénated usage; and conversely, the prefigurative character of irony, in that it gets its point by opposition to the idea of a 'redeemed' language-game within which we should once again be able to use critical concepts in a non-aliénated way. 'Dialectical reason'.

39-40 Resumption of our inquiry into the relation between expressivist doctrines and moral conservatism. Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy as the attempt to dispel fetishistic misunderstanding of the workings of language (i.e. refusal to recognize these as manifestations of our own subjectivity). Failure to assimilate this aspect of the expressivist position allows that position, and the moral realism grounded in it, to be misrepresented as offering support to a conservative ethics and/or politics. (Reification of existing institutions.) Bradley's essay, 'My Station and its Duties', as a case-study. Instances of expressivist views divorced from conservatism: Nietzsche, etc.

41 'Conservatism' and 'liberalism' as contrasting policies with
respect to moral anomalies: what degree of deviancy do we regard as a justification for ceasing to treat the deviant as a ‘soul’ (i.e. as a rational person)? The criteria of ‘rationality’ are determined by our practice. The expressivist view of language, per se, yields no practical lesson in this connection

42  A ‘symptomatic reading’ of the refusal to acknowledge indeterminacy (i.e. incompleteness of intellectual authority) within the moral language-game, and of the associated impulse to objectify dissenting persons

43  How does the objectification of the moral dissident proceed at the level of theory? The technique of ‘divide and rule’: resistance to the authorities who currently specify where the ‘ideal moral observer’ is to stand is interpreted as outright rejection of the public point of view (i.e. as mere selfish individualism). However, opinions can differ as to where one needs to stand to get a good view of moral reality

44  Another theme within realist ethics, which converges with the above: that of ‘curbing imagination’. The process of moral degeneration feared by philosophers who emphasize ‘narrowness’, simple virtue, etc. appears to be identical with that of ‘rational value-change’ as celebrated by the theorists of dialectical reason

45  Moral ‘imagination’ as the critical scrutiny of existing institutions by ‘seeing new aspects’, and – arising logically out of such scrutiny – the speculative construction of alternatives. A quasi-verificationist objection: how can imagination transcend experience with respect to morals? (How can there be Moralität as well as Sittlichkeit?) Reply: speculative thought in the practical sphere can be defended against this objection without abandoning realism, by an argument analogous to that used in the theoretical sphere. The fact of syntactic structure in language ensures that as competent speakers about ethics, we can represent to ourselves moral justifications for replacing existing institutions by others –even though this competence is itself grounded in our personal history of incorporation into the existing institutions. Imagination as a linguistic capacity

46  The ‘breakdown of ethical substance’ as a conscious exercise. How far this can be carried, within the matrix of a given form of life, is a matter of experiment. The renunciation of a ponderous array of (moral) ‘certainties’ might be seen as a mode of asceticism
47 A different asceticism is, however, the target of Wittgenstein’s criticism in the later philosophy. Meaning as a ‘physiognomy’. Rejection of the positivist ideal of a non-interpretative representation of reality. Language considered (a) as an artistic medium; (b) as integral to the performance of work

48 The idea of language as a precipitate of shared physical activity compels us to acquiesce in a ‘transcendental parochialism’. But this must be distinguished from ordinary (empirical) parochialism, for it is not an attitude or a policy, except in the sense that it involves repudiating a certain kind of philosophical illusion. Ascribing the dogmatism of ordinary language (‘This is simply how I act . . .’) to the embodied nature of speakers, where it belongs, serves to insulate our proposed moral realism from irrationalist or chauvinist applications, and so from the ideological abuses with which we have been concerned

49 The problem of the meaning of life identified with that of the transcendental condition – the ‘possibility of the phenomenon’ – of there being a (non-hypothetical) point in doing anything. This possibility is given with our acceptance of the form of life to which our ‘defining situation’ commits us

50 Ethical application of the idea that ‘what is hidden is of no interest to us’ (cf. Wittgenstein’s ‘private language argument’). The meaning of life as a physiognomy. Our conclusion defended against the charge of vacuity

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