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Indirect Communication as a Language-Game: Kierkegaard Through a Late-Wittgensteinian Lens

Abstract: Kierkegaard's influence on Wittgenstein is widely recognized, but is most commonly treated in terms of (shared or opposed) views on religion, philosophy, ethics or nonsense. This paper will attempt to interpret Kierkegaard's writing strategy known as 'indirect communication' in terms not of the *Tractatus*, but of *Philosophical Investigations*, namely as a language-game of sorts. We will attempt to show the deficiencies of Cavell's and Conant's interpretations and, by placing the concept of such communication in context, referring it to similar concepts, such as Socratic irony, we will aim to sketch its grammar and its relation to the 'ordinary' direct communication. Further, we will argue that indirect communication, pertaining to Kierkegaard's concept of subjective truth, avoids the charge of being a private language.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, indirect communication, language-game, life forms

The aim of this paper is to provide a different perspective of the relation between two crucial concepts employed in the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, and to offer another perspective on the connection between these authors. The concepts in question are 'indirect communication' and 'language-game', respectively. In order to show that the former concept can be presented and explained as a specific form of the latter, I will start by providing accounts of those concepts. After that, I will turn to some standard interpretations of the relation between Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's thought, provided by Stanley Cavell and James Conant, and attempt to demonstrate that their treatment of the Kierkegaard-Wittgenstein relation and interpretation of the concept of indirect communication lacks an important aspect. By reading Kierkegaard through late-Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*,

rather than the *Tractatus,* I will finally offer an account of indirect communication as a language-game of sorts, with its specific grammar and life form that it demands.

Indirect Communication: 'the what' and 'the how'

The task that Kierkegaard set before him and his authorship was freeing his contemporaries from two illusions. The first, 'aesthetic' illusion consisted in the erroneous belief that one needs only to be born in a Christian country and be baptized in order to be a Christian. The second, 'speculative' illusion consisted in the belief that the content of Christian religion can be adequately represented in categories of speculative philosophy and objective, historical knowledge. In order to fulfill his task, he employs a method he calls 'indirect communication': he writes under a number of pseudonyms, expressing various stances not only on religion/faith, but on many different issues as well: love, the self, knowledge, truth, duty etc. Each of the pseudonymous 'authors' represents a different existential mode (what Kierkegaard calls 'spheres of existence': aesthetic, ethical and religious) and offers his own account of the presented issues. The purpose of pseudonymity is to establish the distance between the author and the reader. The author confesses that he writes "without authority", that is to say, with no pretensions to be an expert concerning any of the issues he is writing about. Thus the reader is left to her own resources. She has to evaluate the presented positions herself, consider the arguments that are used, and choose the existential mode she finds compelling. Of course, not every issue is subject to this mode of communication. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'* (*Afsluttende uvidenskabelig efterskrift*) Kierkegaard makes a crucial distinction between objective and subjective truth. The first consists in mere facts or information (historical, mathematical, scientific etc.), and is the subject matter of 'direct communication'. The second consists in 'a passionate appropriation' of "an objective uncertainty"[1], that is to say, in the individual's relation to the thing in question. "*Objectively, the emphasis is on* ***what*** *is said; subjectively the emphasis is on* ***how*** *it is said.*"[2] What Kierkegaard aims to do is reinstate the long-lost subjectivity in his contemporaries, because he considers it to be a crucial albeit neglected aspect of a human being. Although the concrete 'how' of every individual's subjectivity remains only his own, the mode of subjectivity is always open to every person, thus providing the foundation for indirect communication. Although the primary task for Kierkegaard is to display "the subjective individual's relation to the truth of Christianity"[3], indirect communication in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works is aimed also at love, marriage, friendship, occupation or calling, contrasting the 'rational' approach to those issues to the 'passionate'

[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments' vol. I*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1992, 203.

[2] Ibid, 202.

[3] Ibid, 59.

one, championing the latter. Showing that life without passionate subjectivity would bear semblance to the life of a psychopath,[4] Kierkegaard argues that the present age has unjustly reduced man to a subject of knowledge (of objective truth), disqualifying his equally important and equally universal ability to passionately evaluate and choose. He believes that indirect communication is a method that can be effectively used to reinstall subjectivity.

Language-games and life forms

The concept of the language-game is more difficult to present since Wittgenstein never offers any strict definitions of it.[5] It is employed in his *Philosophical Investigations* (*Philosophische Untersuchungen*) as a means of criticizing the traditional way of thinking about language. According to this traditional way, "the words in language name objects — sentences are combinations of such names."[6] According to Wittgenstein, this conception of language shows but one of its functions, and perhaps not even its representative function. However, this conception serves as the basis for entire traditional philosophy. Thus, by shifting his conception of language, Wittgenstein is hoping to shift the entire concept of philosophy and its task. He starts with the conception of meaning: instead of representation, it is now defined in terms of use. "The meaning of the word is its use in the language."[7] However, to determine what the use of a word is, we are left with no help of constructivist theories or generalizations; Wittgenstein advises us to "*look and see*"[8], to describe the actual use we are facing. But when we do that, we become aware of a multitude of very heterogeneous uses that are impossible to be reduced to a single general concept. That is why Wittgenstein introduces the concept of a 'language-game'. Just a game has no common concept that would include every particular instance[9], so would the concept of 'language-game' be used to signify activities both as simple as the builders' language-game Wittgenstein depicts in §2[10], and very complex and diverse activities he lists in §23:

"Consider the variety of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

Giving orders, and acting on them —
Describing an object by its appearance, or by its measurements —
Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) —
Reporting an event —

[4] Cf. ibid, 196.

[5] In §7 of his *Philosophical Investigations* he lists some instances of his uses of this term.

[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Wiley–Blackwell, 2009, §1, 2.

[7] Ibid, §43, 21.

[8] Ibid, §66, 31.

[9] Cf. ibidem.

[10] Cf. ibid, 3.

Speculating about the event —
Forming and testing a hypothesis —
Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams —
Making up a story; and reading one —
Acting in a play —
Singing rounds —
Guessing riddles —
Cracking a joke; telling one —
Solving a problem in applied arithmetic —
Translating from one language into another —
Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying."[11]

Instead of searching for an encompassing generality, Wittgenstein suggests we should try to connect these various uses by using the 'family resemblance' analogy. Instead of a shared essence, these language-games are connected through a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and in the small […] I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family a build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and so forth a overlap and criss-cross in the same way."[12] The use of a particular word within a language-game is determined by the set of rules of that game, which need not be explicitly learned or formulated. What is necessary to understand and follow the rule is already our experience with *similar* games. Wittgenstein insists that the distinction between following or breaking a rule cannot be made beforehand, we have to learn the difference during the very activity of the game, by using the experience of the sets or networks of rules that determined the games we had participated in or observed before. This set of rules is what Wittgenstein calls 'grammar', a concept that serves to determine what kind of language-game we are involved in and what is considered meaningful within the scope of that game, and what is not. Put in terms of traditional metaphysics, "*Essence* is expressed in grammar […] Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is."[13] But we must not imagine grammar as something separate from language and the activities connected with it. It is not abstract or normative; it only describes the use of signs in a language. Still, this conception needs to be founded in something Wittgenstein calls "form of life", a concept that has caused much controversy and conflicted readings. Used only five times in *Philosophical Investigations* (§§19, 23, 241 and fragments 1 and 345 of Part II), it apparently serves as a given, necessary for us to "imagine a language"[14]. Participating in a language-game or even "*speaking* a language is part of an activity, or a form of life"[15]. Forms of life are what people agree in

[11] Ibid, 11–12.

[12] Ibid, §66–67, 32.

[13] Ibid, §371, 373, 116.

[14] Ibid, §19, 8.

[15] Ibid, §23, 11.

when they agree on what is true and what is false[16]; the manifestations of hope are the modifications of a certain form of life.[17] If there are multiple languages and grammars, then there is also a multitude of forms of life. Some of them can be culture-dependant, contingent, submitted to change, while it seems that Wittgenstein also allows for some to pertain to entire mankind. "Shared human behaviour is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language."[18] And since it is possible to participate in more than one language-game and more than one language, it is possible for an individual to participate in more than one form of life at the same time.

Kierkegaard as a grammarian

In his essay "Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*"[19], Stanley Cavell depicts one of Kierkegaard's theoretical procedures as essentially grammatical: "He frequently wishes to show that a question which appears to need settling by empirical means or through presenting a formal argument is really a conceptual question, a question of grammar. The statement 'A revelation cannot be proven by evidence' is not an empirical discovery, nor a sensible topic for an argument; it is a grammatical remark."[20] Writing about the case of a minister, Adolf Peter Adler, who was suspended by the Church for claiming that he had had a revelation, Kierkegaard wishes to expose a fundamental misunderstanding surrounding this concept. "The whole book is basically an ethical inquiry into the concept of a revelation, into what it means to be called by a revelation, into how the one who has had a revelation relates himself to the human race, to the universal, and the rest of us to him, into the confusion the concept of a revelation suffers in our confused age."[21] The Church charged Adler to be mentally deranged, and thus, in Kierkegaard's opinion, interpreted the concept of revelation in psychological and political, rather than religious terms. Cavell points out that Kierkegaard's task is similar to the one that Wittgenstein sees as the primary tasks of philosophy. Kierkegaard promises his reader that "he will acquire a clarity about and a deft drilling in individual dogmatic concepts that usually are perhaps not so easily obtained"[22]. That would mean, according to Cavell, that Kierkegaard actually seeks for and places these concepts in the proper grammar. "So his task is one of providing, or re-providing, their meaning; in a certain sense, giving each its definition. This definition is not to provide some new sense to be attached to a word, with the purpose of better classifying information or outfitting a new theory; it is to clarify

[16] Ibid, §241, 88.

[17] Ibid, Part II §1, 174.

[18] Ibid, §206, 82.

[19] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976, 163–179.

[20] Ibid, 169.

[21] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, 3–4.

[22] Ibid, 3.

what the word does mean, as we use it in our lives – what it means, that is, to anyone with the ability to use it."[23] This does not mean, however, that Kierkegaard means to consider revelation as some kind of a mental condition or experience, although he is often regarded as a psychologist, or that his task is "a matter of determining how likely it is, given a certain man's psychological make-up and given a particular historical condition, that he had or will have a revelation (it is always unlikely)."[24] Kierkegaard's question "whether a man in our day can be justified when he passes himself off as having had a revelation"[25] is a grammatical one, according to Cavell, because its meaning is "whether, no matter what occurs in a man's life, we are conceptually prepared to call it a revelation, whether we have the power any longer to recognize an occurrence as a revelation, whether anything any longer could conceivably count for us as a revelation could, so to speak, force us to assert that what has taken place is a revelation."[26] What Kierkegaard insists on is that the concept of revelation has its proper grammar pertaining to a religious form of life that has been well lost in 'the present age', the age of modernity. However, his strategy of indirect communication indicates that it can be revived in the existential mode of heightened subjectivity. But does this mean anything anymore to his contemporaries, or has it become nonsense, since religiousness has been reduced to a historical, objectively observable empirical phenomenon, defined by an external authority of the institution of State-Church? In other words, in order to understand that there is a confusion concerning the concept of revelation, we would have to have some access to the form of life that informs the proper grammar of the use of that concept. Cavell suggests that this is not improbable. "It seems to me right that Kierkegaard should suggest that we do or could know, without explanation, what it means to say that a man 'stands before God'. We know what they mean not just in some sense, but know what they mean in a sense which we may wish to call heightened. That we may not know this all the time is no proof against our knowing; this may only indicate what kind of knowledge it is — the kind of knowledge which can go dead, or become inaccessible. Nor would the fact that we cannot explain the (heightened) meaning of such utterances prove that we do not understand them, both because it is not clear what an explanation would consist in, and because knowing where and when to use an utterance seems proof that one knows what it means, and knowing where and when to use it is not the same as being able to give an explanation of it. It is true that in the religious case an explanation seems called for; but this may only mean, one might say, that we are perplexed about how we know its meaning, not whether we do."[27] With this lengthy passage, Cavell places Kierkegaard in line with Wittgenstein's claim that our ability to imagine a language depends on our ability to imagine a form of life. Speaking about revelation in a proper grammar would then

[23] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, op. cit., 166.

[24] Ibid, 168.

[25] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, op. cit., 77.

[26] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, op. cit., 168.

[27] Ibid, 171.

mean to speak about it from a certain perspective, even by using 'ordinary' words; Cavell compares this to speaking about our dreams. Just as talking about dreams would be impossible in a world in which people don't dream, so the understanding of religious utterances would be impossible for people who were unable to share our religious perspective/form of life. But what Kierkegaard refers to is different: it is an experience of being alienated from, not of being in touch with God that is common to his contemporaries. Just as Wittgenstein claims that another man (from a strange tradition) can be a complete enigma to us,[28] so Kierkegaard claims that an individual in the present age can be an enigma to himself, "because he does not know why he lives as he does, what the point of his activity is; he understands his words, but he is foreign to his life. Other major writers of the 19th century share the sense of foreignness, of alienation, Kierkegaard describes; and not merely their own alienation from their societies, but of self-alienation as characteristic of the lives common to their time."[29] But in that case, if we can even say that an individual does not share a certain form of life with himself, what would be the proper way to speak of that form of life, would the individual be condemned to silence or nonsense, as Kierkegaard suggests in *Fear and Trembling* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*?

James Conant takes Cavell's article as his point of departure, but continues to interpret Kierkegaard's treatment of the concept of revelation using the position of his pseudonymous author of the *Postscript*, Climacus. But Conant's presentation of the issue is far from being unproblematic. "To say that Kierkegaard intends his original statement as a grammatical remark is to say he is offering it to us as a criterion of what it is for something to count as a genuine revelation. If we do not understand this much about revelations then, by his lights, we do not know what a genuine religious revelation is. Yet we continue to employ the word 'revelation' in purportedly religious contexts without realizing that we mean nothing by it."[30] While the last two sentences indeed describe Kierkegaard's position, the first sentence does not. As Cavell rightly asserted, Kierkegaard's task is to point out that the concept of revelation is not being treated in the proper grammar, and not to provide or depict what that proper grammar would be like. Therefore, if Kierkegaard indeed is offering as any criterion here, in could only be the one by which to recognize what does not count as a genuine revelation. Conant is well aware of this when he remarks that Climacus' point in the *Postscript* is that philosophy cannot supply us with the 'meaning of life' we seek from it. "Philosophy, on Kierkegaard's view, can only appear comic in its attempts to fill the vacuum created by the fact that these words have been drained of their meaning for us – drained by the lives we lead, lives in which such words no longer have a use. The inability of these words to signify for us is not a consequence of a property peculiar to this sort of language – i.e., that it points to something ineffable – rather it is a

[28] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., 223.

[29] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, op. cit., 173.

[30] James Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?" in: Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (eds.), *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, London–Toronto, Associated Universities Presses, 1989, 255.

consequence of how we live and what that entails for what these words *can* mean for us."[31] But the fact that words like 'revelation' have lost their genuine religious meaning for us does not mean that they have no meaning at all. On the contrary, it is precisely because we can supply them with alternative meanings (scientific, ethical, aesthetic, etc.) that there can be such a thing as 'falsified' Christianity. We can use 'genuinely Christian' terms in non-genuinely Christian contexts. In Conant's view, Kierkegaard's goal is to cancel such usage. "His attack here on the organized church is not out of loyalty to some ideal of religious institutional reform: it is simply a call for us to end our collective acts of hypocrisy and confess we no longer know what it would *mean* for someone today to call himself Christian."[32] The consequences of such a goal are shown by Climacus in the *Postscript*. Conant suggests that, contrary to some interpretations, Climacus does not mean to show that there is a certain 'hierarchy of nonsense', and that, after delineating that which makes sense from nonsense, there is a further line between gibberish and 'profound nonsense'. There is no such 'thing' or 'things' that cannot be said, there are no deep ethical or religious truths that are beyond language, and yet somehow make sense (not by saying, but by *showing*). "Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein envisioned no alternatives to silence except the following three: those of (1) plain ordinary effable speech, (2) unintelligible though apparently intelligible chatter, and (3) mere gibberish. The latter two alternatives differ only in their psychological import: one offers the illusion of sense where the other does not. Cognitively, they are equally vacuous."[33] What Climacus is saying, according to Conant, is that language cannot show us, not even by failing, anything that lies outside its limits. There are no 'kinds' of nonsense, no way to discern gibberish from transcendence. Not even the paradox of Christianity, as the highest form of paradox, can be distinguished from other kinds of extreme incomprehensibility. This knowledge was supposed to scandalize Kierkegaard's pampered contemporaries, but the effect lacked. "The humor of Climacus's doctrine is that it gradually subverts any possible hope for a ground upon which the integrity of a distinction between the absurdity of the paradox and mere nonsense could be drawn. Its ultimate irony lies in the way that most of his readers seem to be utterly undisconcerted by this fact."[34]

But what Conant presupposes is that Climacus represents Kierkegaard's position. That might not be the case. Climacus is a philosopher/humorist and not a man of faith. Thus, as Cavell observed, he does not participate in the form of life required to make meaningful utterances employing genuinely religious concepts. What he actually says is that, as a philosopher, it is impossible for him to imagine a language that conveys genuinely religious meaning.

[31] Ibid, 256.

[32] Ibid, 257.

[33] Ibid, 249.

[34] Ibid, 261.

Form of life and indirect communication

So far we have seen that, in order to be described as a language-game, indirect communication needs to be an activity determined by a network or rules, or grammar, and to be based on a certain form of life. If we can show that this is the case, then we are safe from the accusation that indirect communication in fact represents a private language, and thus, no language at all. But what kind of grammar and form of life could that be? Is Kierkegaard the first to employ that method?

In his book, *The Art of Living*[35], Alexander Nehamas presents two confronted conceptions of philosophy. "One avoids personal style and idiosyncrasy as much as possible. Its aim is to deface the particular personality that offers answers to philosophical questions, since all that matters is the quality of the answers and not the nature of the character who offers them. The other requires style and idiosyncrasy because its readers must never forget that the views that confront them are the views of a particular type of person and of no one else."[36] More specifically, the first deals with what Kierkegaard calls 'objective truth' and direct communication, and the second with 'subjective truth' and indirect communication. Dealing primarily with the second conception, Nehamas analyzes the works of Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault, and as its most famous representatives he also names Pascal, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, Emerson, Thoreau and Kierkegaard, while as its founder he names Socrates. Nehamas maintains that both conception are legitimate, and that the proper objects of philosophy are not only the things that are of merely theoretical significance for us (like the problems of ancient Greek cosmology), but also the questions of human life and the proper way of living it, where the emphasis is not on the gaining of knowledge but, its application in our action and justifying our action. Socrates' question 'how should one live' is not motivated by curiosity but by desire for the right kind of life. Socrates believes that philosophy can answer this question, provide a criterion for distinguishing the good life from the bad one, a criterion which would further serve as a sufficient motive for a man to accept the good way of life. Aristotle accepts this conception when he says that lectures in ethics serve not to gain knowledge of virtue, but to actually become good. But, that does not mean that this conception is necessarily connected to moral philosophy; it's clear that studying Kantian ethics does not oblige one to accept Kantian principles in his own actions. That is the key difference between these two conceptions of philosophy: not the object it deals with, but the relation towards that object. But now the question remains: if a philosopher writes about his own life project, the values he aimed to appropriate, what should be the appropriate relation of the reader to that work? Should the reader copy the instructions provided by the author, enact them in her own life? Should she care if the author himself had succeeded in applying them in his own life? Nehamas states his position: "the main

[35] Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998.

[36] Ibid, 3.

question still is not whether, as a matter of historical fact, someone else succeeded in living that way but whether one can construct such a life oneself. That can be done in two ways. One can either try to apply someone else's conception to one's own life, and to that extent live well, perhaps, but derivatively; or one can formulate one's own art of living."[37] If we consider the founder of this conception, Socrates, we can gain insight on the peculiarities of this specific language-game. Socratic irony and the fact that we know very little of his life make him impossible to imitate. Taking Socrates as a role model would mean that we have to create ourselves without having any kind of 'recipe' in front of us. That is precisely the task that Socrates set before himself: engaging in dialogues with his fellow Athenians, he employed irony to make them think for themselves, to examine the life they were living and the values and principles they based it upon. The form of life they shared enabled them to deal with the crisis of traditional authority. But this form of life was not limited to that context, nor was the set of rules employed in that sort of language-games. Using indirect communication and numerous pseudonyms, Kierkegaard is in fact mimicking Socrates, so that the reader never knows if he's faced with the author's actual position or irony. In doing that, Kierkegaard is continuing a long tradition existing in philosophy and literature, using rules that have for centuries served to induce genuine, honest re-examination of one's fundamental beliefs. Through indirect communication, the author is meant to remove everything pertaining to him that could stand in the way of the reader's honest relation to the 'objective uncertainty' that he is faced with. The author himself must not be the reason that the reader chooses to believe or accept the issue he is faced with.

However, Kierkegaard is now employing these rules in a different context, as a participant in a different form of life, the Christian one. That form needs to be universal, accessible to all human beings, if faith is to be conceived as a purely subjective relation, and not a privilege of a certain culture, nation of age.

[37] Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, op. cit., 8.