Jun 3rd, 9:00 AM - Jun 6th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Bohlin

Menashe Schwed

Commentary on Henrik Bohlin's "The Dynamics of Belief Systems: A Wittgensteinian view"

MENASHE SCHWED

Philosophy
Ashkelon Academic College
12 Ben Tzvi St.
P.O.Box 9071
Ashkelon 78211
Israel
m_schwed@012.net.il

I agree with the Wittgensteinian approach Bohlin choose to deal with the problems of epistemological scepticism. I myself adopted the same attitude in my talk regarding the concept of rationality. I think that we both feel that the later philosophy of Wittgenstein offer us a way out of the old dichotomies and a better pragmatic understanding of the way we reason and argue.

However, I think that Bohlin's focus on the objectivism-relativism dichotomy is damaging to his main purpose. Taking this dichotomy as a starting point will bind us to its terminology and prelimits us in finding the way out of this old dichotomy. Between objectivism and relativism, there is always the possibility of a critical attitude, which is more supporting for Bohlin's own purpose. The emphasis of the critical attitude is more in line with Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and has by far more relevance to argumentation. I will try to explain this third possibility with the help of the seventy year old metaphor of "forever drifting on Neurath's boat."[1]

Wittgenstein's concepts of "language-games" and "forms of life" are the reasons why we should be modest about our own beliefs. Many of our beliefs clearly result from highly contingent features of our lives and experience. Descartes' epistemology is the heroic attempt to escape from the contingency of his own beliefs: the project of making a completely fresh start, doubting everything he believed, and rebuilding a new belief system on secure foundations. Wittgenstein shows us exactly why we cannot give up *all* of our current beliefs and still rebuild a belief system. If we are looking for new foundations, there has to be some reason for thinking the ones we choose are secure. To have a reason for accepting a belief into the new system, we have to believe in some criteria or principles of selection.

---

[1] Neurath, a philosopher of the Vienna Circle, used the metaphor of a leaking boat to explain how people acquired their knowledge of the outside world as early as 1932 (Neurath 1959, p. 201). Neurath's boat has become famous with Quine version of this metaphor (Quine 1960, p. vii).

Schwed, M. (2009). Commentary on Henrik Bohlin's "Dynamics of Belief Systems: A Wittgensteinian view." In: J. Ritola (Ed.), *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of OSSA 09*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-3), Windsor, ON: OSSA.

Instead, to use the analogy of Neurath's boat, our belief systems must be rebuilt plank by plank while still afloat. The critical attitude does not burn into ashes all the planks of the boat of knowledge, as do objectivism and relativism according to Wittgenstein. After all, this is what the metaphor of Neurath's boat implies: the boat has to be reconstructed in open see; but the fact that we cannot reconstruct it ashore does not mean that the boat has to sink altogether. In this respect, Wittgenstein's main lesson is to show how the dead-ends of both objectivism and relativism can be avoided. Wittgenstein was not satisfied only with his critical project of describing and destroying philosophical dogmas or illusions of understanding; he did not set this critical objective as the sole philosophical task. On the contrary, Wittgenstein saw the critical move as something that is not separable from a positive undertaking of constructive nature. Wittgenstein's philosophy can be described as a continuous oscillation between critical and theoretical or positive enterprises.

Thus, we cannot reconstruct our beliefs from some Archimedean point quite outside the system. This Wittgensteinian point that there is no rebuilding out of nothing is best dramatized by using Otto Neurath's famous image of the boat. In reconstructing our belief system, we are not, as "foundations" suggests, rebuilding a house. We are like a sailor having to rebuild a boat at sea. The whole boat may need rebuilding, but at any one time we have to keep enough of it afloat to enable us to reconstruct other parts.

This is a helpful image as long as we agree about which bits of the boat need replacing. And this is where argumentation is most needed. Since as many critics rightly point out, there is a circularity involved in this Wittgensteinian picture. Some fluid propositions rest on some other certain hardened propositions. However, the support for the reliability of those hardened propositions comes from still other fluid proposition. Thus, our whole system of knowledge is based on a circular argument of this kind. But, if the picture conveyed by Neurath's boat is right, some circularity is unavoidable. Some beliefs must be kept afloat in order to verify the reliability of others. This means that the beliefs will inevitably be in mutual support. For instance, our general system of actual beliefs about the world and our framework principles will be in mutual support.

Hilary Putnam wrote,

> Madmen sometimes have consistent delusional systems; so madness and sanity can both have a "circular" aspect [...] If we have to choose between "circles", the circle of reason is to be preferred to any of the many circles of unreason. (1980, p. 36)

Why is "the circle of reason" to be preferred? We cannot escape a degree of circularity in our belief systems. Which particular beliefs we hold is likely to be influenced by the contingencies of our history and experience. Do these admissions lead to epistemological relativism and back to the old dichotomy that we wanted to escape from?

Argumentation is a way out of this epistemological trap since logic alone is not enough to exclude inconsistent belief systems. The only reason to choose "the circle of reason" as the preferred one is connected to the basic ideas of argumentation theories, as plausibility or implausibility. Such ideas can help to show the epistemological costs of different belief systems in the sense of what we are prepared to accept as the implications of what we believe. Without argumentation theory, there is no way of deciding which costs were acceptable or unacceptable.

Argumentation theories deal with such concepts as plausibility constraints. However, those plausibility constraints come from the core structure of a belief system, from the framework principles and the anchoring context and, thus, there is no neutral plausibility constraints to be used in adjudicating between rival belief systems. Are our different ideas about concepts as plausibility is just the product of our particular personal or cultural histories? It seems that there is no way but to accept the pessimistic view that we will continue to disagree over the very concepts that enable us to argue. Wittgenstein, however, shows us why this is so, and this understanding is obviously part of some kind of progress.

Link to paper

REFERENCES

Neurath, O. (1959). Protocol sentences. In: A. J. Ayer (Ed.), *Logical Positivism* (G. Schick, Trans., pp. 199-208), New York: The Free Press.
Putnam, H. (1980). Brains and behavior. In: N. Block (Ed.), *Readings in philosophy of psychology* (pp. 24-36), Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Quine, W. v. (1960). *Word and object.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.