

Following a Philosopher

Murilo Seabra / Marcos Pinheiro, Brasília, Brazil

1. Following rules and following philosophers

What might be to follow a philosopher? According to the latter Wittgenstein, rules are fundamentally what philosophers are concerned with, rules are what they write - that is, grammatical and not empirical propositions. This idea naturally allows us to transpose Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following into the problem of following a philosopher. We should keep in mind that this idea applies as much to the metaphysicians and analytical philosopher's of the author's time as for himself. From his own point of view, Wittgenstein applied common rules of language to break down the bizarre representation norms - not empirical propositions about the inner workings of reality or language - proposed by philosophers. For instance, against the rule that states the privacy of meanings (sustained by Carnap and Russell as if it were an empirical proposition), Wittgenstein reminds us of an internal relation between the concepts of meaning and explanation, that is, he reminds us that meanings cannot be private as long as they can be explained. The rule that states the privacy of meanings simply takes the concept of meaning out of circulation (or else it drastically alters the concept of privacy).

But we are seldom clear about what it is 'to do the same thing' or 'to follow the same rule'. For we tend to wrongly generalize excessively simple paradigms of 'to do the same thing' as, for example:

(1) A draws a straight line 10 cm long and asks B to do the same thing; we say that B has done the same thing only if B also draws a straight line 10 cm long.

(2) A writes "2, 4, 6, 8, 10" and asks B to do the same thing; we say that B has done the same thing only if he also writes "2, 4, 6, 8, 10".

In other words, the paradigms of 'to do the same thing' which most of us have immediately present in mind belong to the most primitive kinds of repetition ever. We tend to think that B only does the same thing as A in case B acts as an impersonator. Obviously, if we keep that conception of 'to do the same thing' in mind, we will contend that following a philosopher is rewriting what he wrote with different (or perhaps even with the same) words; therefore, that to be a Russellian means something not much different from mimicking Russell.

Wittgenstein undermined the idea that B's doing the same as A must be a case of mimicry by showing that *there are different criteria for identity*. For example, letters 'C' and 'c', though graphically different, are one and the same letter. Many features are left outside the identity criteria of letters, as for instance their size - which, in turn, is taken into consideration when it comes to the identity of other sorts of object. On the other hand, if we rotate the letter 'c' at 90 degrees, we might be unable to discern it from letter 'u'. The spatial position of letters is relatively important to their identity - something that surely cannot be said about bats. Letter 'B' and 'b' are also the same, though one could contend that from the graphical point of view there are more similarities between 'b' and 'p', which are different letters. In short, the identity criteria of letters are different from the identity criteria of colors, which are

different from the identity criteria of thoughts, which in turn are different from the identity criteria of bats. *Identity criteria vary according to the kind of object at hand*. To think that identity criteria always remain the same brings about absurd questions such as if two tokens of the letter 'A' can really be considered tokens of the same kind of letter, provided they do not occupy the same spatio-temporal position - an identity criterion that surely applies for bats.

2. Philosophical propositions

Let us consider for a moment identity criteria of propositions - a particularly important subject when it comes to the question of what following a philosopher might be. Wittgenstein has at least two important considerations about that in his *Investigations*. The first one is fairly straightforward: the same thought - the same proposition - can be expressed in different ways. The second consideration, though not so straightforward, is as important as the first one: there is no single set of identity criteria that holds for all kinds of proposition. Poetic propositions (and also the religious ones) have identity criteria different from philosophical propositions:

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.)

In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.) (Wittgenstein 2001, cf. PI 531)

The statement that a poetic proposition cannot be replaced by any other, that it cannot be expressed in different words, might be a sign of our understanding of it. However, no philosophy teacher would accept a transcription of PI 531 as a sign of her students' understanding of PI 531. This is a specially interesting case, for it shows that (1) and (2) are not particularly good paradigms for the identity criteria of philosophical propositions and therefore not particularly good paradigms for understanding what it might be to follow a philosopher. When it comes to philosophy instead of poetry or religion, one and the same thought can usually be expressed in different ways. And if B contends that A's thoughts can only be expressed in exactly the same way as A did, then we have good grounds to claim that B takes A's propositions as poetic or religious rather than as philosophical.

Wittgenstein thought that, just as there was nothing wrong with regarding 'A' and 'A' as the same letter, so there was nothing wrong with regarding "12, 14, 16, 18" as a sequel to "2, 4, 6, 8, 10" - therefore that writing "2, 4, 6, 8, 10" and writing "12, 14, 16, 18" could easily be seen as a case of doing the same thing. Transposing identity criteria which hold for a given class of objects to a class of objects where they do not hold is what brings about absurdities such as the idea that writing "2, 4, 6, 8, 10" could never be the same thing as writing "12, 14, 16, 18" (since the written characters are altogether different), or

that 'A' and 'A' could never be tokens of the same letter type (simply because they are different tokens of the same letter). Extending these considerations to the problem of following a philosopher we may obtain interesting results. To follow a philosopher might be to *do* what he *did* (i.e., to do philosophy) instead of *rewriting* what he *wrote* (i.e., to interpret him). Depending on who is the philosopher, to rewrite his thoughts might be precisely *not* to follow him. Perhaps this is the case of Wittgenstein: perhaps interpreting him should be something as listening to his exhortations that we do philosophy as the cat that stares at the finger instead of the direction pointed to.

3. Philosophers and commentators

So let us raise the question: did Wittgenstein want to be followed? Did he want us to write about his thoughts or to make an effort to think for ourselves - just as he did? Perhaps the difference between the prefaces of the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* could shed some light here. It is well known that in his first book Wittgenstein believed he had solved all philosophical problems once and for all - such as announced in the book's preface. Since the *Tractatus* had supposedly put an end to philosophy, it would only be possible to keep on interpreting its results (in the sense Wittgenstein talked about interpretation - cf. PI 201). Moreover, these interpretations would never present substantive developments, but only different ways - maybe more precise or exhaustive - of saying what the *Tractatus* had already stated. Clearly the *Tractatus* did not leave enough room for thoughts it did not contain.

The *Investigations'* preface, on the other hand, was written in a much different spirit. There Wittgenstein says he hoped "to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own" (Wittgenstein 2000, cf. PI p.x). The *Investigations* were not supposed to be the last word on philosophy, even though they still could have the last word in questions such as whether the meanings of words are the objects (either public or private) they refer to. After all philosophy had to keep moving; it is not even possible to solve all philosophical problems at once, but only to master an understanding of them that would allow us to stop doing philosophy whenever we want (Wittgenstein 2001, cf. PI 133).

But do these differences between the prefaces of both books really stand for differences in their contents? Judging from one of Wittgenstein's observations about a pre-war version of the *Investigations*, the answer seems to be affirmative:

One could call this book a text-book. A textbook, however, not in that it provides knowledge [*Wissen*], but rather in that it stimulates thinking [*Denken*]. (Wittgenstein *apud*. Hilmy 1987, cf. p.6)

What Wittgenstein announced in the preface of his book was therefore not something alien to its content. The *Investigations* were not meant to stimulate thoughts by chance; this was rather their main goal. Wittgenstein did not want interpreters. The *Investigations* present a set of methods - of *Werkzeuge* - to the solving of philosophical problems, so that it would be pointless to just explain (instead of actually applying) them:

Instead, we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off. – Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem.

There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies. (Wittgenstein 2001, cf. PI 133)

The remark refers to the *Investigations* themselves; it is clearly said that not only results are being presented but also the means to arrive at the results. At this point Wittgenstein brings his methods to the foreground and lets go of the actual examples by which those methods were presented. His methods are even more important than the particular philosophical problems he addressed. Wittgenstein does not direct a large portion of the *Investigations* against the idea that the meanings of words are the objects to which they refer because this idea is particularly difficult to undermine - he wants instead to present through his critique a series of methods that could and should be directed at other philosophical problems.

We hope to have left a few footprints on our pursuing the question of what it might be to follow a philosopher - and specially to have aroused some of the subtler issues involved in the very idea of following a thinker like Wittgenstein. The whole philosophy of the *Investigations* - and in many ways we are not able to hint here by lack of space - can be read as an attempt to create philosophers instead of commentators. And the unsettling possibility also remains that even a good interpretation of Wittgenstein would amount inevitably to a misinterpretation.

Literature

- Hilmy, Stephen 1987 *The Later Wittgenstein: The Emergence of a New Philosophical Method*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2001 *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell