**Wittgenstein and Social Courage[[1]](#footnote-1)**

***Abstract***

*Wittgenstein offers a method of engagement and participation that enables us to establish overlaps between the public and the private. One such overlap is social courage. The duty to help is not a matter of entitlement, but it is an obligation that comes from our sense of connection with others. Wittgenstein’s method of language-games enables us to extend this sense of connection even to strangers because it a ‘socially reflective mode of learning’ through which we are better able to take the perspective of others. Obligations do not just come from a system of codified rules, but from the sense of agency we acquire as a result of reflective engagement in different practices. Wittgenstein does not advance any substantive thesis, but the critical nature of his method offers a framework for understanding social courage without leading to the antagonism between altruism and rationality.*

**The bystander effect**

The various cases of the bystander effect invite us to reflect about the extent to which we have ignored the duty to help in the name of self-preservation and rationality. Kitty Genovese was murdered in the presence of 38 people in her neighborhood, and Wang Yue was ignored by 18 passers-by and was run over by several other vehicles before getting help from a rubbish collector (Hegarty 2011). In these cases, helping is thought to come with risks and inconvenience that are too demanding for ordinary agents. Failure to help Wang Yue, for example, is often attributed to the widespread fear of being made responsible for a victim’s injury. This is what happened when a fellow Chinese named Peng Yu helped an injured elderly woman. In return for his help, Peng Yu was even prosecuted and blamed for the injury (Ibid). The Peng Yu effect, otherwise known as the bystander effect, may have resulted from a world where helping has become increasingly risky. In such a world, helping is an extraordinary act of virtue that cannot be required even as a matter of duty.

Social courage is unusual because it involves helping others despite significant risks. The risks include ostracism, loss of job, and in certain cases, even the loss of life and limb. Social courage is associated with conflicts characterized by inequality of power. The powerful uses his superiority to cause physical or psychological harm to the weaker party, and agents who witness this injustice feel pressured to take non-conformist action in behalf of the aggrieved at the risk of also facing harm from the stronger party (Meyer & Herman 2002). Social courage becomes problematic because it seems to be an altruistic act that is unintelligible from the perspective of rational agency. How is it possible for agents to go against the basic tenets of self-preservation and dare on to help others even if those others are complete strangers? Is social courage merely a matter of stupidity? Or, can it also be an important act of obligation and autonomy?

**The method of language-games and social courage**

Wittgenstein’s method of language-games can help us have a better understanding of social courage without reducing it to a plain case of moral altruism along with its dilemmas on rationality. Social courage is different from moral courage. Moral courage ignores the various situational factors that contribute to socially courageous action in favor of emphasizing pro-social attitudes of an individual (Ibid). Social courage, on the other hand, considers personal satisfaction, indignation, and even rage as legitimate reasons for action. It also acknowledges the many contexts that contribute to socially courageous behavior. It involves acts of benevolence that go beyond the concerns of individual and family life. Yet, it also expresses a high concern for one’s identity (Ibid).

The ‘risky benevolence’ characteristic of social courage becomes obligatory even for strangers and distant agents because we can feel connected to them in various ways. Wittgenstein’s language-games can be viewed as a method that enables us to establish such a connection so we can feel obligated to help whoever is suffering injustice. Obligations do not just come from the system of rules codified and expressed by particular legal institutions. On a more fundamental level, they are created by means of our entry and participation in specific practices. These practices allow for attachments and relationships that constitute specific obligations and responsibilities. Where no such attachments are *de facto* shared, the task of morality is to establish such connections by engaging and reflecting on the more primitive practices we share with others. This becomes a basis for developing ‘normative competencies’ (Shields 1998) that allow for the very possibility of following a rule and determining what counts as our obligation in particular instances. Understanding is a task that cannot be relegated to a system of codified rules. Such attitude fragments our view of action and renders important obligations empty.

There will always be indeterminacy in language and in all the human activities that involve language. Wittgenstein’s language-game approach acknowledges the fact of this indeterminacy by being comfortable with a set of examples and instances that illustrate the different conditions for the meaningful application of a concept (PI 133). The learner becomes a competent user of a language not by means of the ability to cite rules for every instance of action, but by acquiring a receptivity for applying a rule ‘with certainty’ (PI 211-213). Thus, the method of language games involves a drill in the different examples and actions that are associated with a concept, but this training is not meant to result to a mechanical application of rules. On the contrary, it is meant to enable the learner to apply the rule with flexibility while not viewing this flexibility as something contrary to the objective application of rules (PI 232). It is a matter of acquiring ‘reflective mastery’ over an activity so we can acquire the competencies necessary for applying a rule as ‘a matter of course’ (Ibid). Language is characterized by a natural and inescapable indeterminacy, and it is important to recognize our judgment as partially constitutive of objectivity so as not to make impractical demands on understanding (Crary 2002).

Similarly, research on the bystander effect shows that a major deterrent of helping is the ambiguity in defining what counts as a ‘private’ or ‘public’ concern (Meyer & Herman 2002). Conflicts involving violence deter social courage because they are perceived as domestic affairs where intervention amounts to intrusion of privacy (Ibid). In the case of Kitty Genovese for example, many witnesses did not interfere because they thought it was ‘a lover’s quarrel’ (Cherry 2011). Anonymous victims of violence are also often viewed as partly to blame or they are viewed as responsible for getting themselves out of the situation (Meyer &Herman 2002). Help does not come only because of fear of danger, but also because of doubt in the legitimacy of action. The fact that many people do not intervene is taken as a sign of what counts as the socially appropriate way to act in the situation (Cherry 2011).

Thus, the problem of social courage can be construed in terms of indeterminacy in meaning and perception. Because there is always ambiguity in interpreting action, we always exercise choice in perceiving and understanding a situation. Wittgenstein illustrates this in terms of the many ways one can interpret the *same* expression, rule, or picture (e.g. ostension, mathematical rules like addition, duck-rabbit example). Awareness of the natural indeterminacy in language does not imply absolute subjectivity in perception. On the contrary, it invites us to be critical about the extent to which we have excluded others’ views in coming up with an accurate description of a situation. Hence, Wittgenstein rejects the conception of understanding as a form of private language because of its uncritical way of dealing with the indeterminacy of language. The apathy shown in the many cases of the bystander effect is precisely a form of solipsism that comes from an uncritical manner of viewing the world. Because all that exists are one’s needs and interest, taking on the harm that comes with social courage does not make sense. Because of the disadvantages involved, bystanders ‘choose’, consciously or unconsciously, to perceive a risky situation as private.

Research on social courage also shows a Wittgensteinian resolution to the problem of the bystander effect via emphasis on the importance of ‘closeness’. When the persons involved are our family and friends, violence and the gravity of danger do not deter social courage (Meyer & Herman 2002). Female friends regularly stand up against the harassment of their female friends and males help their buddies as part of an unspoken code of honor. When we are socially close to the person’s involved, people said that social courage is ‘natural’ and ‘goes as a matter of course’ (Ibid). In these cases, obligation to help is so evident that it needs no justification despite the risks involved. ‘Closeness’, however, is not always conceived in terms of actual ‘social closeness’. People were also willing to help strangers: 1) when the situation involved a conflict agent’s felt ‘emotionally close’ with, 2) when agents had similar experiences and thought of themselves in the position of the victim currently in need and in want help, and 3) when agents thought of the victim in terms of people they are actually close with (Ibid).

‘Closeness’ is important because it puts us in better position to deal with the task of clarifying human action. The ‘closer’ we are with people or the situations they are in, the better we understand the person, and the clearer we are about how to act in the situation. In such cases, even the supposed diffusion of responsibility ceases to be deterrent (Ibid). Our social or emotional closeness enables to be clear about our role in a situation and gives us ‘sense of confidence’ and ‘conviction’ about the legitimacy of intervention. This is essential during emergency and urgent situations where the need for response is immediate. In those cases, productive action often has to be instinctive and even ‘unthinking’ (or intuitive). Otherwise, doubt will lead to a paralysis in action characteristic of the bystander-effect. Closeness enables us to help others spontaneously regardless of the risks because recipients of help are no longer viewed as an ‘other’ whose being is independent and separate from our own.

Accordingly, ‘socially reflective modes of learning’ are important in facilitating social courage because they enable us to clarify our role in social processes (Ibid). These modes of learning aid in the task of judgment via the practice of perspective taking, the articulation of different interests, and the development of skills and competencies that gives a feeling of strength and confidence in action. This is usually done in role playing & simulations, dialogues, and training in conflict mediation. In these activities, emphasis is given not just on the cognitive but on the emotive, i.e. ‘that we feel what the excluded and threatened person feels’. We are often unconscious of the various factors and structures that prevent social courage (e.g. our fears and interests and the structure of power and authority in groups). Socially reflective learning enables us to become more conscious of these factors so we can be more pro-active in our interaction with others (Ibid).

It is interesting to note how Meyer & Herman (2002) intentionally broadens the scope of social courage to include courage to help others in everyday and ordinary contexts. They claim that everyday behavior in responding to conflicts on the job, school, or at home are more important than violent conflicts in the public realm (Ibid). This is consistent with their emphasis on the importance of social learning in clarifying the ambiguous definitions of the ‘private’. Social learning involves greater awareness of the various continuities between the private and the public. This, in turn, broadens the scope of moral obligation. Hence, though social courage occurs in the public, what often moves us to intervene even in violent conflicts is our perception that they belong to our very ‘area of life’. If for example, the violence occurs in our home or in our bus stop (Ibid).

This implies that social courage requires a broadening of the ‘private’. Wittgenstein’s method of language-games is precisely a socially reflective mode of learning which enables us to challenge conventional definitions of the private so we can be sensitive to the needs and interests of the excluded. Strangers and distant agents also belong to the scope of moral consideration, but they are often neglected because of unfamiliarity. Language-games enables us to understand the unfamiliar so we can better acknowledge the agency of other beings. Hence, Wittgenstein emphasizes the importance of understanding differences by comparing and contrasting various contexts in the use of language. The familiar is put under the context of the unfamiliar (PI 1,185), while the unfamiliar is viewed under the familiar (PI 89,107-8).The same concept is viewed anew from different directions (PI vii), existing modes of understanding are constantly challenged, and we are forced to use imagination rather than appeal to plain rationality or convention. This process enables us to stretch our concepts and ways of looking at things so we develop a sensitivity to the similarities and differences that constitute our shared forms of life (PI 67,130).

Wittgenstein bridges the gap between the private and the public by emphasizing the interdependence between an agent and the linguistic practices of his community. The agent influences a practice in as much as a practice partially constitutes the agent’s identity. Here, Wittgenstein uses the word ‘practice’ in two difference senses. On the one hand, it refers to the established agreements in behavior that we simply need to follow and acknowledge to learn and use a language . On the other hand, it also refers to the agreements in action we develop and constitute as we master the practices associated with the relevant uses of language. The first one refers to the customs and practices of our community, or of mankind, which provide the regularity for making sense of an expression (PI 198-9, PI206). The other one refers to the practice of making judgment itself which the individual can only learn on his own (PI 232). The creative tension that exists between these two senses of ‘practice’ is where language-games does its work. Within this framework, it becomes possible to have a conception of agency that avoids the reductionist tendencies of foundationalist thinking.

Hence, the method of language-games is not to be understood as a communitarian thesis on objectivity. Understanding by means of language-games involves participation in the various practices and forms of life of our community. But part of this form of life is the development of techniques in judgment unique to every person. Indeterminacy and difference in judgment is still present when we use the language-games of our community. This indeterminacy means freedom. It provides the space for innovation and creativity while allowing for a temporal conception of agency. Our identity can be defined in terms of the manner by which we are able to respond to this indeterminacy. At some point in the learning of language, rules are absent and we act without guidance (PI 228). This act is not fixed but the ability from which it comes from constitutes our agency.

Yet, the method of language-games is also not meant to be thesis on the primacy of individual judgment. Wittgenstein’s language-games is not meant to be a substantive thesis at all. Like Kant’s critical approach to philosophizing, the value of language-games anti-systematic approach is for us to be more aware of the limits of our claims (Mosser 2009). Not that we can’t generalize or make any conclusions at all, but that we should acknowledge the limits of those claims if we are to make sense of them meaningful uses of language. Wittgenstein does not say that we can’t make moral judgments (e.g. for example whether social courage is important or not). The fact is that we already do so and we are able to do it competently by acquiring the relevant modes of action that come with the various uses of a concept. To understand a language as part of a form of life simply means to internalize the various practices that naturally come with the use an expression. This results to a pattern of judgment or a type of linguistic competence that shows our very identity.

Thus I agree the ethical point of the Investigations can understood in terms of exercising ‘rational responsibility’ and decision in all that we say and do, or in coming to terms with the essential connection between the things that we say and do. Language is an existential condition and clarification is an ever present task we simply have to live with by constantly trying to improve our sensitivity to various perspectives on action (Crary 2000).

**Conclusion**

Social courage can be conceived as a duty only by means of an individual’s fundamental sense of connection with others. Fostering social courage implies developing social and emotional closeness with others. Wittgenstein presents a method for developing such closeness by means of participation in the various language-games of our community. This method does not consist in blind obedience to rules and conventions, but to the development of a conception of agency that is capable of owning the needs and interests of others. Hence, social courage does not amount to self-denial or irrationality. It is actually an expression of autonomy. Here, autonomy is not just conceived in terms of physical integrity. It is also defined in terms of values, feelings, and instincts one shares with the rest of humanity. Despite the various differences in interests and experiences, there is a shared form of life which we can use to understand each other and deal with indeterminacy. Such a type of understanding functions as a strong source of motivation to act with social courage and empathy.

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1. This is the full version of the paper that appears in *Ethics-Society-Politics. Papers of the 35th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, Kirchberg Austria, August 5-11 2012. Vol XX (pp. 217-219). Austria: ALWS [↑](#footnote-ref-1)