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Who Are 'We'? Dissolving the Problem of Cultural Boundaries

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1. The problem of boundaries

The problem of cultural boundaries arises for any philosophical view that tries to ground meaning or normativity in what "we" do. The particular version of the problem to be discussed here arises out of Ludwig Wittgenstein's writing, but very similar problems arise out of the work of W.V. O. Quine and Wilfrid Sellars. Each of these philosophers was arguing against views that reified word meaning into an abstract or psychological object. While their accounts were different, all held that the meaning of words is determined by what members of a community say and do. It follows that the content of a given word will vary as the community boundaries are drawn differently. For Wittgenstein and Sellars, the issue arises from their commitment to *the* use of a word. Words are misused and some common uses are deviant or erroneous, so identifying the use requires circumscribing the correct uses. Moreover, there are dialectical variations in usage that create systematic differences in meaning among speakers of the same language. Different exemplars of correct usage will yield different analyses of word use, hence different meanings for it. Philosophers who tie meaning to use—whether the use amounts to conditioned responses or moves in a language game—have thus presupposed that the language community is relatively stable and clearly delineated.

But language communities are often neither stable nor clearly delineated. Debra Spitulnik's work on "Town Bemba" illustrates the point nicely. Bemba is one of the languages of Zambia, where there are fifteen to twenty mutually unintelligible language groups. Of these, eight are officially sanctioned for use in the media and governmental affairs. English is the national language and is the medium of instruction in public schools (Spitulnik 1999: 35-37). Town Bemba is an urban phenomenon where words and phrases from various languages get woven into Bemba. It is not a simple case of adopting words for new artifacts, like "television." Common Bemba words are replaced with words from other languages. Speakers use this dialect to mark themselves as hip and urbane. For example, Spitulnik documented the construction *amaguys*. Here the English word "guys" has been adopted and prefixed by the Bemba plural marker *ama*-. The plural is redundant, of course, but "guys" has been adopted as a whole unit from English, and the plural prefix is obligatory in Bemba. Such morpho-syntactic mixing occurs in verbs as well: the construction "*muleensetinga* 'you are setting me up' is composed of *mu*- (second-person plural subject), -*lee* (progressive), -*n* (first person singular object), -*setting* (treated as a verb root), and –*a* (indicative)" (Spitulnik: 47). One of my favorites is *spakajez*, which means 'feeling jazzed up.' Against this background, recall Wittgenstein: "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953: §43) What is "the language" from which "guys," "setting," and "jazz" get their meanings? If we consider them to be words of English, the Bemba uses are deviant. But *amaguys* and *spakajez* are not deviant in Town Bemba. It would be equally plausible to say that these English words get their meaning from their use in Town Bemba. But this would do violence to the situation on the ground; the speakers use

these words because they are English and because of their English meanings. If we cannot identify "the language" in which these words are used, then we cannot identify their meaning. The example of Town Bemba also shows that, unlike many philosophers, speakers are comfortable with the fluidity of linguistic boundaries. Indeed, they are willing to exploit such fluidity when it suits their purposes.

Less anthropological versions of the problem have been recognized for a long time. Any attempt to draw boundaries around languages or "language games" seems arbitrary at best. Moreover, even if we could settle on some boundaries, relativism looms. As Professor Minar's points out in his essay, this drives some interpreters of Wittgenstein toward "transcendental" readings of "we." In this context, Minar presents an interesting take on the problem of boundaries:

> Malcolm is correct that when Wittgenstein talks about "what we say" he is not pointing toward a pluralized transcendental subject, but to discrete and particular groups of practitioners. On the other hand, Williams and Lear are right that he is not merely identifying particular empirical groups (say, of English speakers, or of Cambridge degree-holders) who can be specified independently of their participation in, their commitment to the norms of, the practices in question. When Wittgenstein says "this is what we say", he indicates what we (the participants in the relevant practice) are committing ourselves to doing by engaging in the practice. Thus: We (who follow this rule) do this; we (who infer) draw this conclusion; we (who measure, or measure length), do this; we (who are adders) add like this. This is what we call adding. Wittgenstein's descriptions take the measure of with whom we are in community – test where our (his readers') commitments lie. They do not appeal to specific agreements (particular uses) already ratified by a pre-existing community; and therefore, they do not do so in order to explain, justify, or ground how we go on. (Minar 2007: MS p. 10)

The mistake of many commentators, according to Minar, is to suppose that speakers of a particular language "can be specified independently of their participation in… the norms in question." The puzzle about the boundaries of linguistic communities arises from the same mistake. The problem begins with the observation that use determines meaning, and that different ways of specifying the communities of users entails different meanings.

This set-up of the problem presupposes that the community of users can be identified from the outside, so to speak. Minar, following Malcolm, is saying that communities can only be identified from the inside. My community is all of those who share my commitments, and my commitments cannot be identified independently of my community. Community membership and the content of commitments thus cannot be separated. There is something important and right about this, as I hope to make clear below. That said, there are some *prima facie* problems for this approach.

First, the internal identification of a community seems as arbitrary as the external identification of a community. Why should *I* be a paradigm of addition, when I can not balance my own checkbook? Perhaps, just as from every point in space it seems as if the rest of the universe is receding away, each of us always takes him or herself to be the paragon of our practices. This image only makes the arbitrariness and relativism worries more profound. Second, communities are not transparent to themselves. I do not fully know (and we do not fully know) the contents of my (our) commitments. Hence, there is an important sense in which we could not draw the boundary from the inside. Finally, if we turn away from addition and toward examples of linguistic meaning and normativity, the example of Town Bemba illustrates just how difficult it is to draw boundaries at all. I do not know how to answer the question of whether Town Bemba speakers who use "guys" are using the same word as I do. Indeed, any attempt to do so seems circular. This suggests that the problem of boundaries might need dissolving, not resolving.

Rightly understood, Professor Minar's approach to the problem of who "we" are is vulnerable to none of these problems. However, to see his insight properly, it needs to be separated from some misconceptions. Professor Minar is not responsible for these

misconceptions; they run deep under the philosophical landscape. In this commentary, I hope to show that the good ideas can be successfully separated from related commitments that can (and should) be discarded. In so doing, we can dissolve the problem of boundaries and see the deeper issues more clearly.

2. Deconstructing cultural boundaries

Let us begin with a bit of philosophical archeology. What made it seem as if boundaries could be drawn around languages and practices? The answer, I suggest, has less to do with the philosophical commitments of Quine or Wittgenstein and more to do with the intellectual milieu of mid-twentieth century philosophy. The nineteen twenties through the nineteen sixties were the heyday of the culture concept in anthropology. During this period, anthropologists took it that there were such things as "cultures," that they were distinct from each other, and that they endured over time. This concept of culture quickly diffused into both popular and academic discourse. To begin deconstructing the problem of boundaries, then, it will help to remind ourselves of the history of the culture concept.

The idea of culture as we have it arose in nineteenth century Germany and Austria. Nations or cultures were supposed to be distinct from each other, having distinctive histories, languages, and institutions. The prominent British anthropologist E. B. Tylor brought it into English language anthropology (Tylor 1871). Tylor and other early anthropologists took culture to come in "higher" and "lower" forms. The project of nineteenth century anthropology was to create a taxonomy of human differences and then explain those differences in terms of a progression from lower to higher forms of culture. In the early twentieth century, the evolutionary project was rejected, but anthropologists

retained the idea of culture. Intensive studies of particular groups cemented the idea that cultures were homogenous and distinct, and the tendency of anthropologists to seek out isolated groups reinforced this presupposition. After World War I, the idea that culture was homogenous, stable, and relatively independent of individuals dominated anthropology.

Quine's *Word and Object* is sprinkled with references to anthropological writers like Godfrey Lienhardt, Kenneth Pike, Edmund Leach, Benjamin Lee Whorf, and Lucien Levi-Bruhl. Quine had no qualms about writing about linguistic communities. Indeed, he gave them the causal powers to mold an individual's speech dispositions. For Quine, an individual's ability to speak and communicate is ultimately a set of dispositions. These vary among individuals, but our social interaction shapes them into similar outward forms. In *Word and Object,* he invoked the image of two topiaries; while they share the same outward form, their configurations of branches and leaves are different (Quine 1960: 8). The uniformity among speakers' total dispositional set gives language its "objective pull" away from idiosyncratic associations and toward a public realm of words and objects. Quine uses "the community" in a naturalistic way. It causes an individual to develop speech dispositions that are similar to the rest of the community, thereby creating a common language. Thus for Quine, the model of a linguistic community is exactly the idealized form of culture found in mid-century anthropology. It was static, stable, and exercised control over the individuals.

Wittgenstein is a bit harder to pin down, partly because of his writing style. Nonetheless, we have a record of his responses to Frazier's *Golden Bough,* and Spengler influenced his thinking to some degree. Thus, we can be sure that he was aware of the

anthropological concept of culture. While Wittgenstein is much less of a naturalist than Quine, linguistic communities played a similar role in his thinking about language. The meaning of a word depends on its use. Wittgenstein recognized that use is normative in the sense that it presupposes a difference between correct and incorrect usage. This insight motivated his discussion of rules. While the scholarship on the issue is rather vexed, it is perhaps safe to say that rules get both their content and their normative force from the community. Wittgenstein supposed that communal regularities constitute a standard against which individual uses can be judged right or wrong. Meaning is stable insofar as linguistic communities are stable and uniform. The anthropological concept of culture thus gives "language games" and "forms of life" a solidity that they might otherwise lack.

In spite of their differences, Quine and Wittgenstein used the anthropological conception of culture as the basis for their views about linguistic meaning in strikingly similar ways. Both presupposed that linguistic communities are stable, are uniform within their boundaries, and transcend the individual. Given these properties, linguistic communities provided a standard of comparison against which individual usage could be judged. The difference between Quine and Wittgenstein lies in their conception of the normativity of individual usage. Quine is satisfied with a causal account of the relationship between the individual's speech disposition and the community regularities. Wittgenstein wants to capture the normative character of practices, and uses the community as a standard against which to judge correctness. In spite of the importance of this presupposition, neither philosopher took the problem of boundaries too seriously. I suggest that the anthropological concept of culture as it was espoused in the middle of

the twentieth century made their presupposition to obvious for defense. They presumed that humans were naturally divided into cultures, and that anthropologists had shown cultures to be homogeneous and well-defined. While there might be disputes about odd borderline cases, there seemed to be no doubt that linguistic communities were stable and consistent.

However, even when Quine and Wittgenstein were writing, the anthropological concept of culture had already come under fire. Anthropologists like Edward Sapir and Paul Radin argued that the apparent homogeneity of cultures was an artificial construction of anthropological writing (Radin 1987 [1933]; Sapir 1917). Radin emphasized the differences among members of the same social group. He pointed out that what the anthropologist identifies as "the" culture depends strongly on the selection of paradigm individuals. Even relatively isolated groups of people were internally diverse in ways that were not represented by anthropologists. These arguments were rediscovered and augmented in the nineteen seventies and eighties (e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Rosaldo 1989). These later anthropologists argued that the reality of human life is one of conflict, change, and fluidity. The appearance of stability was an illusion created, not only by the rhetorical forms of ethnographic writing, but by the role of anthropology in colonialism and the administrative need to control native populations. By the end of the twentieth century, very few anthropologists deployed the traditional culture concept. It is ironic that anthropology's principal contribution to popular thought—the concept of culture—is one that anthropologists have come to roundly reject.

In anthropology, "practice theory" denotes a set of ideas that arose to fill the gap created by the demise of the culture concept. Wittgenstein's ideas were received again

through the work of Clifford Geertz (1973), Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. 1977), and Sherry Ortner (1984). In many ways, practice theory has been an improvement on the old culture concept. Bourdieu emphasized the bodily aspects of practices, the ways in which physical posture and habituation are important. Practices are more dynamic than cultures. They are historical, while cultures were typically conceived as static. Practices can be contradictory and subversive. A given social group might have practices that run counter to each other at various points. While the classical culture concept represents human social life as static and uniform, practice theory captures the way in which it is dynamic and diverse. Unfortunately, as it is normally understood in anthropology, practice theory does not help resolve the difficulties under discussion here. Practices have the same problem of boundaries that infects cultures and language games: What set of actions define a practice? Since the practice cannot be characterized without identifying the actions that are normatively appropriate to it, there seems to be no non-circular way of identifying practices.

The classical idea of culture has thus disappeared, and without it, the problem of boundaries is unveiled. If cultural boundaries are artifacts of anthropological writing, and if human communities are marked by diversity, conflict, and change more than uniformity and stability, "the linguistic community" cannot play the kind of role assigned to it by Quine and Wittgenstein. Since Quine and Wittgenstein both argued that rules and meanings are not determinate either as abstract objects or as mental entities, human activity is the only place left to ground content. For both Quine and Wittgenstein, community regularities served to ground content by serving as a standard of comparison. Now, without the concept of culture in the background to support the notion of a

community, such a move seems hopeless. Without stable cultures (or language communities) to provide the standard of comparison, any use of a word might be correct. The problem seems intractable.

3. Toward a Dialogical Understanding of Practices and Normativity

The problem of boundaries arises in a particular intellectual milieu: (1) a culture concept that reified cultures, (2) the idea that normativity requires comparison to a standard, and (3) the idea that normativity is constituted by public interaction. Given these three commitments, we are compelled to think that practices or cultures have determinate boundaries. We have seen how anthropology has undermined the first and made the problem of boundaries difficult, if not impossible, to resolve. The way out of the quandary might be to revise or reject the second commitment. The reading of Wittgenstein and Quine on which there is a significant problem of community boundaries takes their arguments to show that neither abstract entities nor mental states could serve as standards, hence some kind of community-wide disposition must do so. But abstract entities, mental states, and community regularities are all invoked to play the same role: to be the thing that determines correctness. The idea that there must be a standard of this kind gives the problem of boundaries its force, and this suggests that the problem might be dissolved if we could find a way to reject the idea that there must be some*thing* that determines correctness.

Professor Minar's paper makes three important contributions to this problematic. First, as I read him, he is working toward a way of understanding the normativity of rules that does not depend on a standard of comparison (whether a community regularity, mental state, or abstract object), while at the same time recognizing that normativity is

constituted by public interaction. Second, he holds that the regularities of practice do not justify norms. All justification must presuppose a system of norms, hence they cannot be justified or grounded in something external to that system. Finally, he argues that what is to count as an example of the practice is determined from within the practice. The content of the practice thus does not presuppose that the limits of the practice have already been determined.

In the previous section, we saw how the culture concept was replaced by the idea of "practices," and that this notion was inspired by Wittgenstein. I noted, however, that practices have the same problem of boundaries as "language communities" or "cultures." We are now in a position to diagnose this problem: Bourdieu's reading of Wittgenstein understands practices as regularities. Practices are nothing more than temporally extended regularities of behavior exhibited by a sub-group. If we reject the idea that normativity requires comparison to a standard (in particular, a regularity of behavior), the result is a dialogical[1] understanding of practice (Brandom 1994; Rouse 2002; Tedlock and Mannheim 1995). This viewpoint holds that practices are created and maintained by interactions among persons. A practice is not a regularity or pattern of interaction. It is, in a sense, reinvented at each moment by the interactions themselves. My action is a correct instance of the practice insofar as others (both now and in the future) *treat* it as a correct instance. To make this work, the responses have to be understood normatively. This is where Wittgenstein fails. When characterizing the interactions among individuals involved in a practice, his language turns to regularities: "this is what we do." Robert Brandom's analysis is a significant improvement (1994). Normative attitudes of treating

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[1] Joseph Rouse calls this conception of practices "normative."

others as obligated or permitted constitute normative statuses of commitment and entitlement. What makes an inference, action, or word usage *correct* on such a view is not a backward look at consistency with past regularities. Rather, it is a matter of looking forward toward the responses of (actual and possible) others. I am responsible for the consequences of what I say (or do) insofar as others hold me responsible. One of Brandom's more important contributions is to suggest that rules have a special place in this conception of normativity. Rules are themselves pieces in the language game. While we may have reasons for speaking and acting independently of (logically prior to) the existence of rules, once available, rules become a new kind of reason. Practitioners treat rules as determining future actions, and legislating right and wrong, independently of what we actually do. While it would take us too far afield to develop the idea, this is part of what accounts for the "hardness of the logical must." From this perspective, Wittgenstein's ruminations about the ideal machine whose parts do not bend take their place as comments on the role that we give to rules in our (dialogical) practices.

Dialogical practice theory thus does not face the problem of boundaries. Quite the opposite: Brandom has argued that objectivity arises from the structure of interactions (Brandom 1994: Chapter 8). In particular, commitments and entitlements are always criticizable from an open-ended future position. This is the good sense I see in Professor Minar's remark:

> Wittgenstein's descriptions take the measure of with whom we are in community – test where our (his readers') commitments lie. They do not appeal to specific agreements (particular uses) already ratified by a pre-existing community; and therefore, they do not do so in order to explain, justify, or ground how we go on. (Minar 2007: MS p. 10)

To take the measure of with whom we are in community is to submit my judgments to the criticism of others, and to engage in such criticism of their judgments. That is how I

test where my commitments lie, and you test yours. The agreement in judgments (which should no longer sound queer to our ears) that arises thereby constitutes *both* the community of practitioners and the normative content of the practice. The question of how to determine the boundaries of linguistic communities or their practices is thus replaced by a different question: Who has a legitimate claim on our recognition as a possible critic and interlocutor?

When framed this way, it becomes clear that the problem of recognition is partly a political problem. When Professor Minar remarks "we (who are adders) add like <u>this</u>. <u>This</u> is what we call adding," he should not be taken as setting an arbitrary paradigm of addition. Rather, it is the expression of a commitment, the content of which needs to fleshed out by continued criticism. Understood in these terms, it is clear that an appeal to the similarity between another's judgment and my own cannot justify the inclusion of that other as a recognized critic. To do so would be to employ a regularity (the similarity) as a justification for inclusion, and we have rejected this move. The question of who gets to count as a critic is thus a political problem that arises within the context of any particular practice. At its most general level, the question is about who to count as a person; in more specific cases it is a question about who to count as an expert or competent practitioner.

Thus, because it is partly a political problem, the question of who "we" are cannot be dissolved purely descriptively. However, descriptions do matter, and this is where we make contact with Nagel's worries about the "third person point of view." I agree in part and disagree in part with Minar that we shouldn't see Wittgenstein (or Brandom) as showing us how to construct normativity from non-normative materials. I agree that their

project is *not* to show how non-normative materials will show how (or which) practices are justified. That is, indeed, a hopeless project, and insofar as Nagel is portraying Wittgenstein in engaged in it, it is a misunderstanding. Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Brandom all argue that what is to count as a reason or justification can only be seen from within the space of reasons. Reasons make sense only from within a practice that is already normative, and this is how I understand Professor Minar's remarks that we can only understand the limits of a practice from within. Once we have a sense of what is to count as a reason or a consequence, we *ipso facto* know what does not count as a reason. The arbitrary character of this move dissipates once we eliminate the reified conception of rules, regularities, and cultures. To count something as a good reason is to be willing to be held to it by present and future interlocutors, and the boundaries of this community are set by the evolving norms of the practice itself.

I disagree, however, with Professor Minar insofar as I read both Wittgenstein and Brandom as showing what is necessary for there to be normativity in the world. The materials they provide make their account a form of naturalism, at least on my reading. It is not reductive: there is no attempt to identify norms with particular regularities, nor do the natural facts about us serve to justify our practices. In this context, I would like to emphasize three points. First, human life is continuous with animal life. We are the product of evolution, and our minds are continuous with animal minds. Hence, whatever is necessary for normativity will be shared (in part) with other animals. I think that this is consistent with Brandom's account of normative attitudes and Wittgenstein's discussion of natural responses (Risjord 2006). Second, the empirical results of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and animal ethology are relevant to philosophical anthropology.

A being counts as a person only if it can be held responsible, and this means that it must exhibit normative attitudes. But, having normative attitudes requires having the right kind of hardware and inhabiting the right kind of social organization. Exactly what "the right kind" amounts to is largely an empirical question. Hence, empirical work is directly relevant to the philosophical question of who "we" are.

Finally, just as the question of who "we" are is not answerable from a position completely outside of the space of reasons, it is not answerable from a position completely *within* the space of reasons either. We are not transparent to ourselves. Neither the contents of our commitments, nor the psycho-social requirements of those commitments, are readily apparent to us. I talk to humans, but not to burglar alarms. Why? The question is not merely political. The burglar alarm does not have a legitimate claim to my recognition because the facts about it. Its capacities are insufficient for me to be appropriately responsive to it in the way that I am responsive to humans. At some point, I expect, computers will be sufficiently sophisticated to become possible objects of our normative attitudes. Or again: there was a time when non-white humans were taken to be lower forms of the human species. The exclusion of non-white races from our moral concern was a political problem. But it was resolved partly by empirical work in anthropology showing that human variability was not significant. The question of who "we" are is thus not one that can be asked or answered by philosophy alone.

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