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Two Forms of Domination by Reason: A Reply to Oskari Kuusela

Abstract

In his paper “The Problem of Domination by Reason and its Non-Relativist solution” Oskari Kuusela describes a problem about our conception of rationality, which he labels the problem of “domination by reason”. This problem has contributed to generate, Kuusela notes, a widespread dissatisfaction with reason, which has resulted in a tendency to discard ideals of rationality altogether. Kuusela, in his paper, provides a response to this dissatisfaction. He argues that Wittgenstein, if we read him correctly, exemplifies a conception of reason that doesn’t incur the problem he indicates. In my response, I suggest a possible extension of Kuusela’s reflections. Domination by reason, as I argue, may also take another form, different from the one recognized by Kuusela. This alternative form is interesting for two reasons. First, those concerned about rationality’s dominance have quite often in mind this latter problem. Second, it is not obvious that the alternative version of the problem can be solved by appealing to the conception of rationality Kuusela locates in Wittgenstein: it could even be argued that such a conception, on a certain construal, may contribute to reinforcing it. I suggest that, if we focus solely on the aspects of Wittgenstein’s method highlighted in Kuusela’s paper, then such methods may be taken to promote domination by reason (in the alternative sense I introduce). There are, however, other aspects of Wittgenstein’s philosophy – most notably, his conception of ethical language – which may help us to dispel this version of the problem.

Kuusela describes a problem about our conception of rationality, which he labels the problem of “domination by reason”. This problem has contributed to generate, Kuusela notes, a widespread dissatisfaction with reason, which has resulted in a tendency to discard ideals of rationality altogether. Kuusela wants to provide a response to this dissatisfaction. He argues that Wittgenstein, if we read him correctly, exemplifies a conception of reason that doesn’t incur the problem he indicates.

I agree with Kuusela that, if one defines “domination by reason” the way he does, then Wittgenstein’s conception of clarification provides a solution to it. I also agree that, given this definition, some of Wittgenstein’s interpreters may end up promoting this kind of domination. My aim is not, accordingly, to question anything internal about Kuusela’s account. What I would like to do, in what follows, is rather to suggest a possible extension of Kuusela’s reflections. Domination by reason, as I will argue, may also take another form, different from the one recognized in Kuusela’s paper. This alternative form is interesting for two reasons. First, those concerned (both intellectually and politically) about rationality’s dominance have quite often in mind this latter problem: to this extent, if one shares Kuusela’s intent to contrast current attacks to “the value of logic and reason, truth and knowledge” (2019: 23), one has also reason to consider this alternative form of domination. Second, it is not obvious that the alternative version of the problem can be solved by appealing to the conception of rationality Kuusela locates in Wittgenstein: it could even be argued that such a conception, on a certain construal, may contribute to reinforcing it. There are, thus, interesting questions as to how Wittgenstein’s philosophy may relate to the form of domination by reason I introduce.

In what follows, I will summarize what are, for my purposes, the crucial aspects of Kuusela’s argument and outline his notion of domination by reason (§1); I will then introduce the alternative conception of domination by reason and suggest why I take it to be significant (§2); I will conclude by reflecting on the relation between Wittgenstein’s philosophy and the version of domination by reason I have outlined (§3). As I will argue, if we focus solely on the aspects of Wittgenstein’s method highlighted in Kuusela’s paper, then such

methods may be taken to promote domination by reason (in the specific sense I have in mind). There are, however, other aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy which may help us to dispel this alternative version of the problem.

1. The pre-modern form of domination by reason

In order to introduce the alternative version of the “domination by reason” problem, I will start by summarizing what I take to be the gist of Kuusela's argument. My summary will be rather tendentious: I will use a set of notions that are not explicitly invoked in Kuusela's paper, thus rephrasing his position in my own terminology. I will, in particular, locate Kuusela's account of the problem of domination by reason through a contrast between two different pictures of rationality. My pictures are obviously too crude to aspire to any theoretical or historical accuracy. I introduce them (in line with Kuusela's reading of Wittgenstein's method) merely as clarificatory devices. My hope is that, by means of these simplified models of comparison, the contrast between forms of domination by reason I would like to highlight will emerge more clearly. What follows, accordingly, is not intended as an exhaustive account of Kuusela's argument: I will only focus on those elements of his position which are relevant to bring out the contrast I am interested in.

The problem of “domination by reason”, as Kuusela presents it, may be connected to a certain picture of rationality. Within this picture, we can recognize that A and B are both rational, and at the same claim that A has *more authority* than B when it comes to decide what counts as a deliverance of reason. Reason, in this perspective, implies an asymmetry in normative status (a certain structure of entitlements and commitments): if A is more authoritative than B, then B, *qua* rational, is committed to defer to A's verdict as to what counts as a reason for what; and A is entitled to impose her verdict on B, independently of whether B recognizes the verdict as rational. The asymmetry in normative status may be grounded in the thought that some people are, in some sense, *more rational* than others. One might think, for instance, that rationality is a capacity that comes in degrees; or that there are inferior and superior kinds of rationality; or that reason involves a skill that is acquired to a greater or smaller measure (this latter claim is then

compatible with seeing reason as a capacity which is universally and equally distributed). I will label this picture, mostly for the sake of having a label, but also for reasons that will become clearer in what follows, a “pre-modern” picture of reason.

Kuusela, in formulating his problem, alludes to some of these ideas: domination by reason arises, in his sense, when we have two interlocutors who “both [...] partake in reason”, and yet one of them “may appear to be in a position to legitimately coerce, by means of arguments” the other, “due to her more advanced capacity or skill” to clarify concepts (2019: 24). Here, in line with (what I am calling) the “pre-modern” picture, reason is associated with an asymmetric normative status, and this status is attributed on the basis on one’s degree of possession of rational capacity or skill. This gives rise to a form of domination, because one may be coerced by a reason one doesn’t assent to; reason is thus, in this perspective, not inherently incompatible with coercion. (Of course, talk about “domination” assumes that there is something wrong or “unjust” with this conception of reason: Kuusela takes this for granted, and I will similarly presume, in what follows, that one agrees with Kuusela on this). In what follows, I will refer to the idea that one can be coerced by a reason independently of one’s assent as the *pre-modern* form of domination by reason.

One might perhaps think here, as a historical example of this kind of domination, about Aristotle’s discussion of women’s rational capacities in *Politics*. Aristotle writes that females (differently from slaves) have a deliberative part of the soul, but “without full authority” (Aristotle 1959: 63). One may read this as claiming that, while women are rational like men, their kind of rationality is inferior: hence, while they can to a degree and in certain contexts think on their own, their authority is not full or final, and they must ultimately defer to men. Here, we have a clear case of pre-modern domination by reason: men can speak in the name of reason, and at the same require that women accept their verdicts independently of their deliberation; in this conception of rationality, the idea of a rational coercion is not an oxymoron.

The pre-modern picture of reason can be, and of course has been, contrasted with a different one (typically, the sense that the pre-modern

picture of reason implies a form of domination depends on one's allegiance to the picture of reason I will now introduce). According to this alternative picture, instead of thinking of reason as compatible with a hierarchy of normative statuses, we should think of it as based on everyone's free assent. Reason, in this perspective, entails *mutual* commitments and entitlements: others are committed to recognize my entitlement to assent to exercises of reason and I am similarly committed to recognize others' entitlement to assent (this normative status may or may not be based on an equally distributed capacity: for the purposes of this discussion, we can leave this open).¹This kind of picture, of course, finds an influential expression in Kant's philosophy:

Reason depends on this freedom for its very existence. For reason has no dictatorial authority; its verdict is always simply the agreement of free citizens, of whom each one must be permitted to express, without let or hindrance, his objections or even his veto. (Kant 1929: 593)

I will refer to this, in what follows, as the “modern” picture or conception of reason. (The association of this conception of reason with modernity is explicit, for instance, in Hegel: “The principle of the modern world requires that whatever is to be recognised by everyone must be seen by everyone as entitled to such recognition”; 1991: 355).

On the background of this contrast between competing pictures of reason, one may summarize the gist of Kuusela's argument as follows. The “domination by reason” problem should not lead us to get rid of reason altogether: the loosely post-modern urge to discard ideals of rationality as such is an “overkill” (2019: 26). What we should rather do, according to Kuusela, is to abandon the conception of reason that gives rise to the problem (in my terminology, the “pre-modern” conception of reason), and adopt the “modern” conception of reason instead. Kuusela, in his paper, associates the modern conception primarily with Wittgenstein. Kuusela, for instance, reads in this light §599 of *Philosophical Investigations*: “Philosophy only states what everyone grants to it”. Wittgenstein is here not talking explicitly about reason but characterizing his philosophical practice of clarification: the idea is that this practice illustrates what paradigm exercises of rationality should look like from a Wittgensteinian standpoint. In

¹ For a recent exploration of this problem, see for instance Pippin 2008: ch. 7, and McDowell 2009: ch. 9.

Wittgenstein’s perspective, the fact that someone doesn’t recognize a piece of clarification as speaking for her is a justification for discarding that piece of clarification. It doesn’t make sense, then, to say that someone is “coerced” by reason: if there isn’t free assent, then there isn’t, properly speaking, reason (“A clarification cannot be imposed on anyone, and still qualify as a clarification”; Kuusela 2019: 31)². If this conception of reason is tenable, then we can hold on to the notion of reason without incurring the “domination by reason” problem.

Kuusela’s paper also makes a second point. It is possible, for someone, to be committed to the modern conception of reason and systematically fail to live up to that commitment in one’s intellectual practice. This happens, for instance, with some of Wittgenstein’s interpreters. Philosophers such as Kenny, Glock, or Backer and Hacker are (to couch Kuusela’s point again in my terminology) ultimately relapsing in a version of the pre-modern conception of reason. These interpreters don’t attribute to Wittgenstein the biologicistic notion that certain categories of people have a limited degree, or an inferior kind, of rationality. The coercive potential of reason seems to rest, here, on an acquired skill. These interpreters believe, in fact, that use of language is essentially governed by rules of grammar. An appeal to such rules enables us to exclude certain combinations of signs as meaningful *in advance* – in advance, that is, from what a competent speaker may find worth saying in a given context. If one adds, to this, the supposition that the philosopher is (because of her training) more *skilled* when it comes to detecting rules of grammar under the motley of our linguistic responses, the stage is set for a form of domination by reason: the philosopher may take herself to be entitled to tell the layperson what she can or cannot say, quite independently from what the layperson, on the basis of her

² On the idea that Wittgenstein’s vision of language implies a mutual recognition of entitlements see also Stanley Cavell (1979: 28): “If I am to have my own voice in [language], I must be speaking for others and allow others to speak for me”. Cavell also draws, from this point, a methodological moral congenial to Kuusela’s: “In philosophy that proceeds from ordinary language [...] the way you must rely upon yourself as a source of what is said when, demands that you grant full title to others as sources of that data”. This is why, Cavell concludes, “the appeal to ordinary language cannot directly repudiate the skeptic [...] for example [...] by claiming that he cannot mean what he says”. (1969: 239-240). Direct repudiation would be an exercise of domination by reason, or, as Cavell puts the point “a piece of abuse” (1969: 240).

linguistic responses, wants to say. The competent speaker is expected here to defer to the superior authority of the philosopher, who can dictate what she is allowed to mean, thanks to her “superior understanding of grammatical rules” (Kuusela 2019: 27). These interpreters are, ostensibly, committed to a version of the modern conception of reason (they want, for instance, to take in their stride Wittgenstein’s claim that philosophy only states what everyone grants it). And yet, their way of articulating Wittgenstein’s conception of clarification falls back into a version of the pre-modern conception of reason, and hence licenses domination by reason in its “pre-modern” form.

One way of putting the point of Kuusela’s paper, in the light of the terminology I have introduced, may then be: the “pre-modern picture” of reason is not a thing of the past. Its problems are still with us, and structure the thinking of those who take themselves to be immune to them. While Kuusela presses this point explicitly about certain Wittgenstein interpreters (2018), one may in fact extend the point to Kant himself. As Kuusela argues elsewhere (see 2008), Kant’s conception of reason strongly invites a form of domination by reason akin to the one detectable in Glock, Kenny, and Baker and Hacker. Kantian reason focuses on not imposing a *law* on a subject from the outside; but the assumption that reason is essentially law-like is on a par, here, with the (faux-Wittgensteinian) assumption that concepts are governed by *rules* of grammar. This seems to allow, again, for domination by reason: the Kantian philosopher may legislate, in the name of reason, what the layperson can and cannot say, independently from what the person actually finds worth saying. If this is right, then one may claim that Wittgenstein’s philosophy illustrates better than Kant’s a conception of reason devoid of “dictatorial authority”. If we want to fully live up to the ideals of the modern conception of reason, we may need Wittgensteinian clarification, rather than Kantian critical philosophy.

2. The modern form of domination by reason

This completes my tendentious summary. In what follows, I would like to suggest a possible direction in which Kuusela’s reflections on Wittgenstein and domination by reason could be developed. It is

possible to recognize, as I will argue, another form of domination by reason. This form of domination by reason (differently from the one discussed so far) is not generated by a commitment (overt or unwitting) to the pre-modern picture of reason: it may be taken to arise, instead, in the context of the modern conception of reason. I will label this second form of domination by reason, accordingly, the “modern form” of domination by reason. There are, for the purposes of this discussion, two main reasons for considering it. First, as I will suggest, those who are concerned (both intellectually and politically) about reason’s coercive potential have quite often in mind domination by reason in its modern form. To this extent, a vindication of the claims of reason should address also this latter version of problem. Second, there are questions as to how Wittgenstein’s philosophy relates to this alternative form of domination by reason. Modern domination by reason, as I will suggest, seems to be possible even if the ideals of the modern conception of reason are fully respected (that is, even if one is living up to a conception of reason as “the agreement of free citizens”). Kuusela has shown (again, in my terminology) that Wittgensteinian clarification fully realizes the commitments of the modern conception of reason: this philosophical practice illustrates, in other words, a conception of reason which is free from domination in its *pre-modern* form. This, however, doesn’t yet say anything about whether Wittgensteinian clarification is exposed to domination by reason in its *modern* form. I will discuss this question in the next section. In this section, I will explain what I mean by “modern domination by reason” and suggest why it may be intellectually and politically significant.

The concern that I will associate, in what follows, with modern domination by reason has intuitively this form: if “philosophy”, only states what everyone grants it, who decides what is the content of this “everyone”? If rationality is a community of free and equal citizens, who counts, exactly, as a member of this community? What fuels this concern is the fact that the label “rational person” has been used, historically, to legitimize the interest of specific groups: scrape the rhetorical patina off the concept of “rational person” and what will appear will be, say, a white, male, bourgeois, liberal, western, heterosexual, cisgendered, subject. Appeals to the ideal of rationality are taken to mask and naturalize, in this perspective, positions of social

and political power. Acknowledging this may lead us to speak of “domination by reason” in a different sense. Here, the problem is not that the community of rational people is pictured as hierarchical (as in the “pre-modern” conception). The problem here is that some people may feel excluded from the “equal community” of rational persons.³ This gesture of exclusion may then be perceived as a form of “domination by reason”, in a distinctly “modern” sense.⁴

Reflection on the modern variety of domination by reason may easily encourage the tendency to abandon ideals of rationality altogether. One might think, for instance, that the fact that appeals to reason have been used to marginalize certain groups is no mere accident: the very concept of reason necessarily implies gestures of exclusion, which are as such morally unjustifiable. One might suggest that the repeated failure to realize in practice the ideal of an equal community of rational people shows that the concept is inherently confused. Or one might take this historical failure to indicate, on pragmatic grounds, that appeals to rationality are not useful anymore: it would be better to devise different emancipatory vocabularies (we may call this collection of attitudes the “post-modern” conception of

³ One may object, here, that the modern form of domination by reason actually collapses into the pre-modern one: couldn't I exclude someone from an “equal community” by assigning them an “unequal status”? The person would be included in the community of rational persons at large, but not, so to speak, in the subset of rational people who are equal to one another. My point, however, is that for that to be possible one must understand the community of rational people as inherently hierarchical (in line with the pre-modern picture). Those committed to the modern picture of reason must reject this understanding, in the name of the emancipatory vision of a community of free and equal citizen. The modern form of domination by reason insists on the exclusionary potential of this bit of emancipatory language. The pre-modern form of domination by reason, by contrast, stresses one's rejection of the emancipatory language, or one's failure to live up to it. See also, on this point, the last paragraph of this section.

⁴ I am here of course alluding, without pretending to faithfully represent them, to themes that have a found expression in various strands of contemporary French philosophy, of feminism, and of Marxism. One may think, in this connection, about the work of authors such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser or Judith Butler. These authors often conjoin, to the point about the exclusionary potential of the language of reason, a further thought: domination is exercised also, and by the very same token, on those who are included in the community of rational people, who are subjected, in this perspective, to a process of normalization. As Foucault (1982: 781) puts the point: “There are two meanings of the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.”

reason). Whether one sees rationality as normatively problematic, conceptually confused, or strategically inept, the acknowledgment of the modern form of domination by reason may encourage a certain kind of distrust towards rationality.⁵ Those who are committed to counter this distrust have, accordingly, reasons to consider the modern form of domination by reason as well.

The issue is important not only intellectually but also politically. Consider, for instance, two central contemporary political phenomena, which may be called (again, by resorting to quasi-stipulative labels) “identity politics” and “populism”. By the former, one might indicate struggles for political recognition on the part of marginalized groups; by the latter, one might think of the claim that “the people” is deprived of its voice in the political process, which is perceived as dominated by usurping elites. These instances are often portrayed as conflicting. They have, however, a feature in common: these political demands don’t take the form of complaining about specific wrongs, but of lamenting how one is not even in the position of making one’s complaint heard.⁶ In both identity politics and populism, in other words, the claim that one has been deprived of one’s voice has a central role. The deprivation of political voice, here, typically takes the form of labelling the excluded party as, in some sense, “irrational”: the marginalized identities to which I have alluded above have been notoriously presented as infantile, pathological or otherwise incompetent; and there is of course a long history of dubbing “the people” as unreasonable, excitable, and unfit for self-government.⁷

This helps us to locate a risk inherent in contemporary complaints about “post-truth politics”. The complaint may be seen as a variation of the strategy of marginalization I have just outlined: associating certain political demands to post-truth politics may be a way of casting non-complying or oppositional voices as irrational, and hence as not deserving full political consideration. The risk, then, is that those who

⁵ I am borrowing the distinction between normative, conceptual, and strategic critiques of humanism from Fraser (1985).

⁶ The fact that marginalization takes the form of labelling the excluded part as “irrational” doesn’t imply, here, that the excluded one will demand recognition *qua* rational. It may be part of the demand that the concept of rationality is abandoned.

⁷ Connections between struggles for emancipation (both of specific groups and of the people as a whole) and deprivation of political voice are investigated, for instance, in Connolly 1995, Laclau 2005, Rancière 1999.

are used to control what counts as truth may present as “post-truth politics” what is in fact an attempt to question their control: the attempt is disqualified, in that perspective, as an irrational impulse to do away with truth altogether. Appeals to rationality and truth appear, here, at best as the self-congratulation of a fading elite; at worst, as manoeuvres to neutralize radical opposition or exorcise political disaffection.⁸ This kind of manipulative appeal to the concept of rationality in the political domain may be seen, then, as an important source of contemporary distrust about rationality: those who are exposed to the manipulation may feel inclined, for that very reason, to reject notions of rationality altogether (in that sense, the accusation that people are engaging in post-truth politics may turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy: but here, those who are in fact promoting it are those who claim to oppose it). This is not to deny, of course, that claims of political marginalization cannot also be used in a manipulative way; they may be mobilized, for instance, by a ruling group against a competing one. This possibility, at any rate, further shows the political significance of claims of this kind.

I have pointed out to some of the reasons why the modern form of domination by reason may also be worth considering. Its presence can be attested, as I have suggested, both in recent philosophical debates and in contemporary political movements; in both cases, this presence has inspired scepticism, distrust or impatience towards the idea of reason. If one is interested in addressing these grievances, one may then want to consider domination by reason in its modern form as well. The pre-modern variety, insisting on asymmetric entitlements within the community of rational agents, undoubtedly accounts for one aspect of the problem, and in practice, political marginalization often hovers between the two varieties of domination I have outlined. I believe it is helpful, however, to keep them conceptually separated. This is partly because the modern version illustrates the oppressive potential of what presents itself as a form of emancipatory language; and partly because the sense of being *entirely* deprived of one’s status as a self-determining agent may capture more faithfully (as I will argue below) the experience of those who are marginalized.

⁸ See, on this, Lorna Finlayson’s contribution in this special issue (Finlayson 2019).

3. Wittgenstein and modern domination by reason

Kuusela shows that a modern conception of rationality may solve the problem of domination by reason which stems from a pre-modern conception of rationality. As I have suggested, however, the modern conception of rationality may give rise a new form of the problem of domination by reason – one which deserves serious philosophical and political consideration. Now, if Wittgenstein partakes of the modern conception of rationality, one might wonder whether domination by reason of the modern sort is relevant to Wittgenstein’s methods as well. Does Wittgenstein’s conception encourage the modern form of domination by reason? Or can his philosophy help us to dispel it? My suggestion will be that Wittgenstein’s understanding of clarification, *taken on its own*, may encourage domination by reason in its modern form. To this extent, if we take Wittgenstein’s practice of clarification as defining an ideal of rationality we should always strive for, then this understanding of rationality would imply a form of domination. Wittgenstein, however, doesn’t present clarification as an ideal we should always strive for: he is, in fact, importantly interested in the *limits* of clarification; the question of when clarification is actually called for is, for Wittgenstein, just as important as the question of how clarification should be practised. It is this region of Wittgenstein’s teaching, as I will suggest, that gives us some resources to deal with the modern variety of domination by reason.

While Kuusela doesn’t explicitly address the modern version of domination by reason, it may seem that, by developing Kuusela’s account of rationality as clarification, we might be well-placed to exorcise the problem. Modern domination by reason raises the question of *who counts* as a rational person: the concern is that, under the veneer of emancipatory language, appeals to rationality are used to stabilize oppression. Kuusela’s account of clarification deals, admittedly, with a different question: his problem is not *who* counts as a *rational person* but *what* counts as a *reason*. One might, however, develop Kuusela’s account to answer the question of the limits of the community of rational persons: and this answer, one might think, may go some way towards dispelling the concern that such limits imply prejudicial exclusion. In this perspective, the Wittgensteinian considerations that Kuusela uses to dispel worry about the pre-modern

form of domination by reason could be adapted to dissolve domination by reason of the modern sort as well. I will now outline one way of fleshing this proposal out and then move to show why, in my opinion, the proposal faces a crucial difficulty.

Consider Kuusela's answer to the question "what counts as a reason?". Kuusela's key point is that, for Wittgenstein, "only what actually clarifies ultimately counts as a clarification, as opposed to attempted clarifications" (2019: 40). This is, as I have suggested, a way of reiterating the Kantian point that a reason must, by definition, require the free assent of a rational subject. But who counts as a rational subject? One could try, here, to develop Kuusela's point to answer this question as well. The development might go, roughly, as follows: just like a consideration counts as a reason to the extent to which it is actually agreed upon in the context of an exercise of clarification, a rational subject (or, at least, "one of us") is everyone with whom we can ultimately agree with in the context of an exercise of clarification. The suggestion is not the implausible one that we can only establish someone's rational status after having gone through extensive sessions of Wittgensteinian philosophy. We surely take, as our starting point, the concept of rational person we have inherited in learning a language. But, if we respect the spirit of Wittgensteinian clarification, we will not see the concept we have inherited as delimiting *in advance* who counts as a rational subject. If someone strikes us as deviant on the basis of that understanding, that is not, in this perspective, a reason to conclude that the person is outside the scope of clarification, hence of reason. The deviancy would be, on the contrary, a reason to *initiate* a clarificatory exchange – to test, in other words, whether we can reach some agreement. It may be that we will reach agreement (and this may involve a transformation of our inherited notion of rationality). Or it may happen that we fail to "find our feet" with the outsider, so that she remains, as Wittgenstein puts it, an "enigma" to us (compare PI: §390 and PI II: xi, p. 233). Either way, no one is ruled out *in advance* as a participant in the elucidatory exchange. This may then seem to placate at least some concerns about the modern form of domination by reason. For the concern stems, in part, from the sense that one's voice is ruled out *from the very outset* from the conversation of reason, thus preventing a proper recognition of one's rational status. And even if,

after a clarificatory attempt, we fail to reach agreement with the outsider, this doesn't license us to simply dismiss her voice: given the open-ended character of Wittgensteinian clarification, the exclusion should always be seen as provisional; not only is no voice ruled out in advance, but no voice is ruled out once and for all.

This is, of course, rather abstract, and much more would need to be said in order to make this suggestion workable. But even if one succeeds in honing the proposal, there is, it seems to me, a fundamental difficulty with it, and I would like, by way of conclusion, to evoke it.⁹ The difficulty can be summarized as follows: the *very demand* that outsiders clarify their position to insiders runs the risk of *silencing* that position. Using clarification as a way of testing the boundaries of the community of reason may, to this extent, end up making unavailable precisely the voices of those who feel excluded by those boundaries. Despite her best intentions, the Wittgensteinian philosopher would thus encourage the modern form of domination by reason: the appeal to reason (here, to a practice of clarification) would result in silencing those who feel marginalized.

In order to give a more concrete sense of the problem, I would like to discuss, in this connection, a passage from James Baldwin's essay "Down at the Cross" (1964). One of Baldwin's central themes is the African-American experience of radical exclusion from their community: US society is presented, by Baldwin, as possessed by a deeply entrenched tendency to deny black people's humanity (As Baldwin writes in "Letter to My Nephew": "You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity and in as many ways as possible that you were a worthless human being"; 1964: 18). In articulating this experience, Baldwin finds himself saying things such as "There is, by definition, no virtue in white people" and "sinners have always, for American Negroes, been white". Baldwin remarks, in this regard:

That sinners have always, for American Negroes, been white is a truth we needn't labor, and every American Negro, therefore, risks having the gates of paranoia close on him. In a society that is entirely hostile, and, by its

⁹ It is worth emphasizing that this difficulty is in no way meant as an objection to Kuusela: the difficulty arises in connection with my *imagined* development of one of Kuusela's points. Of course, I don't take Kuusela to be committed to my purely conjectural extension of his point; nor, accordingly, I am suggesting that the difficulty counts as an objection to his position.

nature, seems determined to cut you down [...] it begins to be almost impossible to distinguish a real from a fancied injury. [...] All doormen, for example, and all policemen have by now, for me, become exactly the same, and my style with them is designed simply to intimidate them before they can intimidate me. No doubt I am guilty of some injustice here, but it is irreducible, since I cannot risk assuming that the humanity of these people is more real to them than their uniforms. Most Negroes cannot risk assuming that the humanity of white people is more real to them than their color. [...] For the horrors of the American Negro's life there has been almost no language. The privacy of his experience, which is only beginning to be recognized in language, and which is denied or ignored in official and popular speech [...] *lends credibility to any system that pretends to clarify it* (1964: 93, my emphasis).

Baldwin is here reflecting on the oppressive function that a demand to clarify one's position may have, when directed at those who (like the "American Negroes") experience a radical form of alienation from their community. In expressing that alienation, Baldwin describes that society as "entirely hostile", and white people as inherently evil. Shall we demand, here, that Baldwin *clarifies* what he means? Shall we ask, for instance, in what sense society is "entirely" hostile, and "all" white people are evil? Is he denying that the condition of African-Americans has improved since the end of slavery? Or that some white doormen and policemen may be good? Are these hyperboles designed to draw attention to more specific wrongs and shortcomings? Or is he perhaps just expressing a feeling?

Baldwin, who is well aware of these retorts, is anyway determined to resist them: he acknowledges that he is guilty of some injustice, but he insists that the injustice is irreducible. The experience he is after can only be articulated through this irreducibly unjust use of words. Baldwin remarks, in this sense, that "there has been almost no language" to describe the horrors of this experience, and that the experience appears, when presented in words, private. In this predicament, the more one tries to clarify the experience, the more it will appear either unintelligible or vastly exaggerated. For this reason, attempts to clarify this experience of oppression ultimately "lend credibility" to the system which generates it: one will end up feeling that people like Baldwin have nothing specific in mind, or that they are, at best, overstating some more specific complaint. Either way, the character of black exclusion is made unavailable (for whites, but, more

crucially, for blacks). What is lost is, for instance, the sense in which the experience of this exclusion is an experience of paranoia, one in which it becomes impossible to distinguish real from fancied hostility, and all white people appear as devils: that one is precipitated into this state, and led to express oneself in unintelligible ways, is part of what is done, according to Baldwin, to the “American Negroes”. White America throws blacks into paranoia and then demands that they speak clearly; but, as Baldwin implies, a society that “closes the gates of paranoia” on some of its members doesn’t have the right to demand clarity from them.¹⁰ Shall we suggest, in reply, that Baldwin’s dogmatic insistence that there are truths he needn’t labor in the light of reasonable counterexamples actually borders “post-truth politics”?

The notion of clarification at stake in Baldwin’s passage seems to me, roughly, continuous with Wittgenstein’s own understanding of it (or, at least, with a central strand of this understanding). The demand, on the part of Baldwin’s white interlocutors, may be represented as a demand to fix the meaning of his words by indicating contexts of meaningful use. If this is right, Baldwin’s points about clarification and oppression illustrate a problem with the proposal I have outlined above. According to the proposal, we should investigate the boundaries of our community through some form of Wittgensteinian clarification: such a practice may help prevent modern forms of domination by reason, because it doesn’t rule out any participant in advance, or once and for all. But, as Baldwin suggests, the very idea of demanding to those who have been deprived of their voices that they clarify what they mean, may have the function of lending credibility to the system that marginalizes them. In fact, the very complaint that one has been “deprived of one’s voice” is likely to result, under elucidatory pressure, unintelligible, exaggerated or at best metaphorical (surely, the point is not that one has never been listened to?). This may cement the impression that this kind of experience is, ultimately, not worthy of serious consideration. This, however, obscures the sense in which

¹⁰ It is important to note that Baldwin stresses the extreme difficulty, rather than the complete impossibility, of articulating the experience he is after in language. One may see this as a reflection on the conditions of possibility of his own writing. The sense of possibility may be connected, here, to the acknowledgment of the mode of expression evoked in the last two paragraphs of this section. The sense of difficulty may be associated, accordingly, with the difficulty of that acknowledgment.

one's confusion may be, as suggested by Baldwin, precisely an effect of one's marginalized position: one's society, by not listening to the experience, maintains itself in an opaque position with respect to its deeds. In such cases, adherence to a requirement of clarification seems to lead to a form of domination by reason: appeals to reason are used to silence those who claim to be excluded from the community.¹¹

Wittgenstein, however, in no way presents clarification as a *requirement*: he is, on the contrary, interested in the possibility that one may, in certain circumstances, resist a demand to clarify oneself. This possibility has a central role, for instance, in the *Lecture on Ethics* (see also Wittgenstein's discussion of "secondary sense"; PI: II, pp. 216ff.). Wittgenstein discusses here a series of experiences ("I feel absolutely safe", "I wonder at the existence of the world", etc.) which he takes to be definitive of ethical perspective. The forms of expression chosen by Wittgenstein are here comparable to the ones used by Baldwin: to say that one is absolutely safe (how can one be safe no matter what happens?) is just as baffling as saying that one's society is entirely hostile (how can it, then, be *one's* society?). But Wittgenstein, again like Baldwin, resists the demand to make the meaning of his expressions determinate. In response to the suggestion that perhaps he hasn't yet found "the correct logical analysis" of what he means by expressions of this kind, he declares: "I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance" (LE: 11). The nonsensicality of these expressions belongs, for Wittgenstein, to their very essence. This should not lead us, however, to discard the expressions. As Cora Diamond has written, Wittgenstein is rather inviting us to adopt a different kind of understanding: instead of focusing on what *the expressions* mean, we can engage in a kind of "imaginative understanding" of the *person* who utters these nonsensical expressions; this is an exercise in "letting oneself be taken in by the appearance of sense that some nonsense presents to us" (Diamond 2000: 165).

This points to a different kind of response to those who, like Baldwin, feel deprived of their voices. Instead of demanding that they clarify their grievances, one should engage in an imaginative

¹¹ Compare, for a related point, Cavell's discussion of Rawls and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in Cavell 1990.

understanding of their perspective. What could lead, for instance, someone like Baldwin to claim that he lives in a society which is entirely hostile, and that it is, by its nature, determined to cut you down? Can one imagine oneself in that position? A lot more would need to be said about the possibility and prospects of this kind of response. My point is here a more limited one: it may seem that this kind of response, by not reiterating a demand for clarity, has at least a chance to react to the voices of the marginalized without reinforcing their exclusion. If one wants to develop a Wittgensteinian response to the *modern* form of domination by reason, one should then attend to this register of Wittgenstein's philosophy. It is Wittgenstein's reflection on the limits of clarification, rather than his account of how clarification ought to be practised, that is relevant here. As I have suggested, appeals to the practice of clarification may prove, in this context, to do more harm than good. As Kuusela has shown, however, Wittgenstein's reflections on clarification are valuable when one is considering the other form of domination by reason I have discussed: the one that introduces, within the community of rational persons, some form of asymmetric entitlement.

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