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Wittgenstein, Pessimism and Politics

“**W**ORK ON PHILOSOPHY,” Wittgenstein once wrote, “is really more work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them)” (*CV* 24).¹ Taken quickly, this remark suggests both a close connection between philosophy and one’s personal views, and a self-regarding conception of philosophy, unconcerned with anything so worldly as political freedom and equality. It is, moreover, a commonplace amongst interpreters of Wittgenstein that understanding his philosophy requires understanding his life—much more than, for example, we need to understand Quine’s life in order to appreciate *Word and Object* or Kant’s life in order to interpret the *Critique of Pure Reason*.² And amongst the biographical details available to us concerning Wittgenstein it is not unusual to find the admonition that we should worry not about how to alter the world around us for the better, but about how to change ourselves in order to accommodate that world. As late as 1946 he wrote: “If life becomes hard to bear we think of improvements. But the most important & effective improvement, in our own attitude, hardly occurs to us, & we can decide on this only with the utmost difficulty” (*CV* 60). —Not the sort of attitude from which one might hope to draw inspiration or advice about how radically to change the world in order to struggle against suffering and injustice.

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, ed. G. H. von Wright with H. Nyman, revised edition by A. Pichler, trans. P. Winch, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 24.

² See, for example, G. H. von Wright, “Wittgenstein in Relation to his Times” in *Wittgenstein and His Times*, ed. B. McGuinness (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982) 110.

It is no surprise, then, that critics and defenders alike have imputed to Wittgenstein conservative political views and found those views centrally at work in his philosophical writing. But, as others have observed, the story is not so simple.³ I shall argue that there is evidence for thinking that Wittgenstein was culturally pessimistic and disdainful of politics, an attitude that does not bespeak any *active* commitment to conservatism. And insofar as he could overcome that disdain, I contend, there is as much reason for thinking that he was politically Stalinist as there is for thinking that he was a traditional conservative. At the very least, any attempt to portray him as a conservative owes us some story about the evidence I shall cite. However—and this is the thesis that matters most to me—the only feature of his views on either culture or politics that has any essential bearing on his philosophical writings is his hostility to the idea that science and technology will cure the ills of Western societies. This point of influence marks Wittgenstein's refusal to model philosophical inquiry on natural-scientific inquiry, and it is compatible with a range of political views.⁴ Moreover, charges that Wittgenstein's philosophy is conservative in its own right turn on misunderstandings. Indeed, I shall argue that in two important and related respects Wittgenstein's work is in harmony with the tradition of *Ideologiekritik*: in eschewing a natural-scientific model of inquiry, it aims to provide a perspicuous representation of our concepts; and it is anti-essentialist to its roots.

Conservatism and Pessimism

Several incidents and remarks from Wittgenstein's life admit of a conservative interpretation. In contrast to Bertrand Russell, who was imprisoned for his opposition to the First World War,

³ See, for example, Jacques Bouveresse, "The darkness of this time": Wittgenstein and the Modern World," *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 11–39; Andrew Lugg, "Was Wittgenstein a Conservative Thinker?" *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 23.4 (1985): 465–74; Joachim Schulte, "Wittgenstein and Conservatism," *Ratio* 25.1 (1983): 69–80; Allan Janik, *Style, Politics and the Future of Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989); and Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990) 342–44, 347–54.

⁴ See Von Wright, "Wittgenstein in Relation to his Times."

Wittgenstein was quick to enlist in the Austrian army in 1914.⁵ Russell described him as “very patriotic,”⁶ and in his notebooks during the war Wittgenstein wrote of his “terrible sadness” that “the German race” would be defeated by the English, who, he acknowledged, were the “best race in the world” (Monk, *Wittgenstein* 114).⁷

In the summer of 1922, Russell, who had been addressing the second annual summer school of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, met Wittgenstein in Innsbruck. According to Monk, they quarrelled about Russell’s political views: “Wittgenstein rebuked him so severely, that Russell said to him: ‘Well, I suppose *you* would rather establish a World Organization for War and Slavery,’ to which Wittgenstein passionately assented: ‘Yes, rather that, rather that!’” (Monk, *Wittgenstein* 211).⁸

The disdain that Wittgenstein bore toward activism for international peace persisted throughout his life. His former student, Maurice Drury, reports a conversation from around 1930 in which Drury commented that an acquaintance “was working on a thesis as to why the League of Nations had failed.” Wittgenstein’s response was dismissive: “Tell him to find out first why wolves eat lambs!”⁹ And in August of 1946, one year after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Wittgenstein wrote in his notebooks:

⁵ —Well, not *that* quick. According to Monk (*Wittgenstein*, 111), he tried unsuccessfully to get out of Austria first, but, having remained, he could have been exempted from military service for medical reasons. He chose not to seek exemption.

⁶ Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell: The Middle Years: 1914–1944* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968) 133.

⁷ Talk of “races,” however, was not far from Russell’s views at the time. Russell’s initial criticism of the war was not that sending young men to degrading deaths was immoral, but that the Austrians were a “highly civilized race,” as were Britons, whereas the Russians and Serbs were “primitive” and “barbaric”—not fitting allies for the English. See Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996) 373.

⁸ Monk, citing Engelmann, argues that this undated exchange occurred during the Innsbruck meeting, since Russell avoided Wittgenstein for some time after that. The anecdote mentions only “a ‘World Organization for Peace and Freedom’ or something similar,” but Russell’s presentation to the WILPF summer school took place in August of 1922. See Gertrude Bussey and Margaret Tims, *Pioneers for Peace: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom 1915–1965* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965) 41, 232. Thanks to Kathryn Harvey.

⁹ Maurice O’C. Drury, “Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein,” *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) 116.

The hysterical fear of the atom bomb the public now has, or at least expresses, is almost a sign that here for once a really salutary discovery has been made. At least the fear gives the impression of being fear in the face of a really effective bitter medicine. I cannot rid myself of the thought: if there were not something good here, the philistines would not be making an outcry. But perhaps this too is a childish idea. For all I can mean really is that the bomb creates the prospect of the end, the destruction of a ghastly evil, of disgusting soapy water science and certainly that is not an unpleasant thought; but who is to say what would come after such a destruction? The people now making speeches against the production of the bomb are undoubtedly the dregs of the intelligentsia, but even that does not prove beyond question that what they abominate is to be welcomed. (CV 55f.)

There is an ambivalence here that I shall return to later, but even with that ambivalence noted, I find the hostility of this passage shocking. And it does not seem outrageous on the face of things to interpret Wittgenstein's attitude here as utterly reactionary—especially when the “the dregs of the intelligentsia” included such figures as Russell and Einstein.¹⁰

It is not merely disdain that runs through these remarks. The comment about wolves and lambs, in particular, suggests the view that there is no point in trying to understand the failure of the League of Nations unless one first has a firm grasp of instinctive behaviour. It is as much in the *nature* of nation-states and their leaders to display a predatory instinct as it is in the nature of wolves to do so. And any individual attempt to intervene in the affairs of nations or institutions will simply run up against such instincts. Indeed, Wittgenstein seemed to think that the possibility of *rational-*

¹⁰ Einstein had urged Roosevelt and then Truman to develop the bomb, but after its use he argued that political structures like the nation state had to be dismantled and replaced by a world-government, if there were to be any assurance that such weapons would not be used again. See Ronald W. Clark, *Einstein: The Life and Times* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1971) 586ff.

ally changing the world on an institutional level was a lost cause:¹¹ “Who knows the laws according to which society unfolds? I am sure even the cleverest has no idea” (CV 69). Institutions, like languages, cannot be predictably changed by individual efforts, even though the efforts and actions of individuals cause institutions and languages to evolve, as is suggested by the remark that there is “nothing more stupid than the chatter about cause & effect in history books; nothing more wrong-headed, more half-baked.—But who could put a stop to it by saying that? (It is as though I wanted to change men’s and women’s fashions by talking)” (CV 71). Hints of this attitude surface in a frequently cited passage from the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, which draws a further link with philosophical problems: “The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of philosophical problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and of life, not through a medicine invented by an individual.”¹²

This pessimism about directed social change contrasts starkly with the “scientific socialism” of the Soviet Communist Party and the Vienna Circle alike. And it calls to mind the cultural pessimism of Oswald Spengler, a conservative writer who found his way onto Wittgenstein’s list of personal influences, which also included the infamous anti-semitic, homophobe and misogynist, Otto Weininger (CV 16). Maurice Drury reports that Wittgenstein recommended Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, though he thought it was too long and not to be trusted “about details” (Drury, 113). John King, another student, remarks that Wittgenstein approved of Spengler’s “masterly summary of the character of different cultures and cultural epochs.”¹³

Exactly what was it about Spengler that Wittgenstein admired? According to Von Wright, what Wittgenstein got from Spengler

¹¹ A more thorough defence of this claim is provided by Bouveresse, “The darkness of this time.”

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, ed. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978) 132. This passage occurs in a discussion of set-theory, but its reach seems grander. The connection between set-theory—all by itself—and “modes of life” seems rather attenuated, but there might be a more robust connection between modes of life and certain philosophical problems in general.

¹³ John King, “Recollections of Wittgenstein,” in Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein* 73.

was not any conservative political idea, but inspiration for the notion of a “family resemblance” that plays such a key role in the arguments of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Von Wright, 116). J. C. Nyíri, by contrast, sees Spengler’s dismissal of the idea of progress as a characteristic of conservative thinking, and he finds a commonality between Wittgenstein and Spengler at just this point.¹⁴ Consider a variant draft of what was later published as the Foreword to Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Remarks*:¹⁵

Our civilization is characterized by the word progress. Progress is its form, it is not one of its properties that it makes progress. *Typically* it constructs. Its activity is to construct a more and more complicated structure. And even clarity is only a means to this end & not an end in itself.

For me on the contrary clarity, transparency, is an end in itself.

I am not interested in erecting a building but in having the foundations of possible buildings transparently before me. (CV9)

We have, then, some plausible *prima facie* evidence for thinking that Wittgenstein’s political views were conservative, and such evidence, in turn, raises the question of whether or not his philosophical writings bear the mark of such conservative thinking.

¹⁴ J. C. Nyíri, “Wittgenstein’s Later Work in Relation to Conservatism” in McGuinness (ed.) *Wittgenstein and His Times* 44–68. For critical responses to Nyíri see Janik, *Style, Politics and the Future of Philosophy* 40–58; Lugg, “Was Wittgenstein a Conservative Thinker?”; Monk, *Wittgenstein* 342–44, 347–54, 486–87; Schulte, “Wittgenstein and Conservatism”; Béla Szabados, Review of *Wittgenstein and His Times*, ed. B. McGuinness, *Canadian Philosophical Reviews* 4.1 (1984): 34–35; and Naomi Scheman, “Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground,” *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. H. Sluga and D. G. Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 383–410. For related discussion see Bouveresse, “The darkness of this time”; Von Wright, “Wittgenstein in Relation to his Times”; and S. A. M. Burns, Critical Notice of David Rubinstein, *Marx and Wittgenstein: Social Praxis and Social Explanation*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 15.1 (1985): 133–49. Eagleton offers other reasons for seeing Wittgenstein as a conservative, at times overlapping with Marcuse’s, which I shall discuss below, but Eagleton is far more sensitive to the sorts of considerations that the aforementioned commentators adduce than is Marcuse. See Terry Eagleton, “Wittgenstein’s Friends,” *New Left Review* 135 (1982): 64–90.

¹⁵ Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. R. Rhees, trans. R. Hargreaves and R. White (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975) 7. Hereafter abbreviated *PR*.

Pessimism, Scientism and Stalin

Against this brief sketch of Wittgenstein as political conservative, we must juxtapose several considerations. First, cultural pessimism is not the exclusive province of political conservatives. Secondly, there is some evidence that Wittgenstein was sympathetic, in practice, if not in theory, to some variety of socialist politics. Thirdly, the ambivalence that I noted in Wittgenstein's remarks about the A-bomb points toward another sort of explanation for his hostility toward the "dregs of the intelligentsia." Let me attend to these points in order.

One need not be a conservative to be a pessimist. Critical theorists of the Frankfurt School lamented the pervasive influence of "instrumental reason" in advanced industrial society and, in the wake of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, disparaged the phenomenon of "positive thinking" (*ODM* 144ff.).¹⁶ The grisly machinations of the Third Reich, Herbert Marcuse argued, were not the result of madness and irrationality, but of the cold embodiment of means-end rationality in the institutions, industries and economy of National Socialism and Italian fascism (*ODM* 189). And whereas the distorting ideology of nineteenth-century capitalism had served its purposes by warping the *beliefs* of citizens of the burgeoning Western democracies, the ideology of late capitalism carved out its niche in the very *desires* of proletarian and bourgeois alike. "The most effective and enduring form of warfare against liberation," Marcuse wrote, "is the implanting of material and intellectual needs that perpetuate obsolete forms of the struggle for existence" (4). Such "false needs" (4), Marcuse feared, lay so thick on the social ground that critical theory might not be able to offer any practical advice on how to escape domination. "The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future" (257), he remarked. Dialectical thinking could provide no positive suggestions, no fresh vision of a better society. It could only negate and hope that new alternatives would emerge in practice.

Such pessimism on the left also haunts the writings of numerous French thinkers, from Althusser to Foucault and Irigaray. As Foucault notoriously remarked, "I think to imagine another sys-

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon P, 1964) 144ff.

tem is to extend our participation in the present system"¹⁷—though it should be added that in these instances the pessimism seems to stem as much from a theoretical preoccupation with structuralism as from any dispirited reaction to the barbarism of the past century.¹⁸

Secondly, the question of Wittgenstein's political orientation cannot be answered by ignoring the evidence that he favoured some variety of socialism. Wittgenstein was known by his friends and acquaintances to have expressed left-leaning political views at various times from the 1930s onward and, for a time, was seriously committed to moving to the USSR with his companion, Francis Skinner, and living the life of a manual labourer (Monk, *Wittgenstein* 340ff.). Undoubtedly, this plan was not motivated simply by solidarity with the proletariat. Wittgenstein was a great admirer of Tolstoy from the time he purchased a copy of *The Gospel in Brief* in Galicia during the First World War (115ff.). There is more than a little irony in this fact, given his stinging denunciations of peace-activism, but he seems to have been deeply moved by the idea that a simple life of hard work was in some way morally purifying. Fania Pascal, a member of the Cambridge Committee of the Friends of the Soviet Union and married to the translator of Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology*, taught Russian to Wittgenstein and Skinner during 1934.¹⁹ In her opinion, such Tolstoyan romanticism exhausted Wittgenstein's motives for travelling to the USSR: "He would not quote things said by Lenin or Stalin, and it is inane to affix any political label to him" (Pascal, 43f.).

However, as Monk argues, it was likely Wittgenstein's hostility to Marxist *theory*—*scientific socialism*—that gave Pascal the im-

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D. F. Bouchard, trans. D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977) 230.

¹⁸ I direct this charge against Althusser in Michael Hymers, *Philosophy and Its Epistemic Neuroses* (Boulder: Westview P, 2000) 146–47, 175–76. The case of Irigaray, as well as Cixous and Kristeva, is discussed by Andrea Nye, "French Feminism and Philosophy of Language," *Nous* 20.1 (1986): 45–51; and "The Inequalities of Semantic Structure: Linguistics and Feminist Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy* 18.3–4 (1987): 222–40. Foucault rejected structuralism, but his writings of the late '60s bear the mark of its influence.

¹⁹ Fania Pascal, "Wittgenstein: A Personal Memoir" in Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein* 12–49.

pression that he was utterly apolitical in his attitudes, for there is testimony from other friends and acquaintances that suggests a certain regard for the *practice*, but not the theory, of Marxism. Most explicitly, Monk cites the Marxist classicist, George Thomson, as writing that Wittgenstein “was opposed to [Marxism] in theory, but supported it in practice” (*Wittgenstein* 343). Wittgenstein’s friends and acquaintances, it is worth noting, included, during the early 1930s, two Marxist economists at Cambridge—Maurice Dobb, one of the founders of the Cambridge Communist Cell (*Wittgenstein* 348), and Piero Sraffa, also a friend and political collaborator of the imprisoned Italian Communist leader, Antonio Gramsci. It is Sraffa, Wittgenstein writes in the Preface of the *Investigations*, to whom he is “indebted ... for the most consequential ideas of this book” (*PI* x).²⁰ And there was also the classicist and linguist, Nicholai Bakhtin, a “fiery communist” (Pascal, 14) and estranged older brother of the influential Marxist literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin (Eagleton, 76).

The brand of left-politics that this anecdotal evidence associates with Wittgenstein probably has little appeal for radical thinkers today. He was, if we trust the emphasis of these facts, something of a Stalinist—again, in practice, if not in theory. Indeed, more perfervid imaginations have seen in Wittgenstein’s privacy and aloofness the habits of a Cambridge spy-master, driven to Stalinist politics by his feelings of responsibility for catalysing the unrivalled anti-semitism of his (and anyone’s) most notorious school-mate, Adolf Hitler.²¹ But we need not lose our heads here. What does seem to be the case is that on more than one occasion Wittgenstein expressed approval for Stalin’s repressive methods. To Drury, for example, he once remarked: “People have accused Stalin of having betrayed the Russian Revolution. But they have no idea of the problems that Stalin had to deal with; and the dangers he saw threatening Russia” (Drury, 144). And Rush Rhees describes the following exchange:

²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, R. Rhees and G. H. Von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968) x.

²¹ See Kimberly Cornish, *The Jew of Linz* (London: Arrow Books, 1999). Hitler attended the Linz Realschule during Wittgenstein’s time as a student there.

If you spoke of regimentation of Russian workers, of workers not being free to leave or change their jobs, or perhaps of labour camps, Wittgenstein was not impressed. It would be terrible if the mass of the people there—or in any society—had no regular work. He also thought it would be terrible if the society were ridden by ‘class distinctions,’ although he said less about this. ‘On the other hand, *tyranny* ...?’—with a questioning gesture, shrugging his shoulders—‘doesn’t make me feel indignant.’ (Rhees, 205)

There is a third point that, I said, needs to be juxtaposed against the portrait of Wittgenstein as a conservative. This is connected with the ambivalence that I noted earlier in Wittgenstein’s remarks about the A-bomb. What he is tempted to say is that there must be something good about the bomb because so many people for whom he has disdain—the “dregs of the intelligentsia”—have come forward to condemn it. But, as Wittgenstein reminds us elsewhere, “What we ‘are tempted to say’ ... is, of course, not philosophy; but it is its raw material” (*PI* §254). What attracts him about the bomb is that it “creates the prospect of the end, the destruction of a ghastly evil, of disgusting soapy water science” (*CV* 56). The *interesting* objects of Wittgenstein’s hostility here, I think, are *scientism*—the view that all and only science counts as knowledge—and the accompanying idea that science has the potential to solve all the great ills of humanity (see Monk, *Wittgenstein* 486). The atomic bomb constitutes for Wittgenstein a pragmatic refutation of the latter thesis and the prospect of a completely new beginning, a wiping-clean of the slate of Western decline of which scientism is emblematic. In this connection two points need making: (i) anti-scientism is not the privilege of any particular political stance; (ii) Wittgenstein was not at all hostile to the idea of change on a grand level, as the new beginning that I referred to above suggests.

(i) Wittgenstein’s resistance to scientism is an integral part of his philosophy, as I shall argue below. But it may seem that merely citing this attitude does nothing to absolve Wittgenstein of the charge of conservatism. After all, at a time when Wittgenstein was writing that “Science is a way of sending [us] off to sleep” (*CV* 6), many self-described liberal and socialist thinkers were happily aligning

themselves with the “Scientific Conception of the World.”²² But there are two reasons for doubting the force of this charge. First, Wittgenstein’s hostility towards scientism and scientific progress does not by itself distinguish him from the members of the Frankfurt School whom we encountered above. Science, according to thinkers like Marcuse, was characterized by means-end rationality, and “the *internal* instrumental character of this scientific rationality,” he thought, made it “the *a priori* of a *specific* technology—namely, technology as a form of social control and domination” (*ODM* 157f.). Whether this is an adequate philosophy of science is doubtful, but what matters here is the alliance of a radical politics with anti-scientism. Secondly, whatever the sources of Wittgenstein’s anti-scientism, it is clearly consonant with important strains of those radical philosophies that are the *de facto* heirs to the Marxist tradition: feminism and environmentalism. So there is no *immediate* inference from anti-scientism to conservatism.

(ii) Wittgenstein, although pessimistic about the possibility of directed societal or cultural change, was not opposed to the idea. We have already encountered a passage from *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* in which he comments that “an alteration in the mode of life of human beings” is required to cure the “sickness of a time,” and this, too, is what is capable of curing “the sickness of philosophical problems,” giving “philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself in question” (*PI* §133). Such a cure will typically be achieved only in individual cases, he thinks, if at all: “It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another—but, of course, it is not likely” (*PI* x). However, the *fact*, if that is what it is, that a changed mode of life and thought is typically possible only in individual cases does not entail any judgment about the *desirability* of this. It is, in fact, something to be lamented. That is what makes Wittgenstein a *pessimist*:

It is not by any means clear to me, that I wish for
a continuation of my work by others, more than a

²² Hans Hahn, Otto Neurath and Rudolf Carnap, “The Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle,” trans. P. Foulkes and M. Neurath, *Otto Neurath: Empiricism and Sociology*, ed. M. Neurath and R. S. Cohen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973) 299–318.

change in the way we live, making all these questions superfluous. (For this reason I could never found a school.)

The philosopher says "Look at things like this!"—but first, that is not to say that people will look at things like this; second, he may be altogether too late with his admonition, & it's possible too that such an admonition can achieve absolutely nothing & that the impulse towards such a change in the way things are perceived must come from another direction. For instance it is quite unclear whether Bacon started anything moving, except the surface of his readers' minds. (CV70)

If trying to change oneself is the best that one can do, then this is not because wide-scale change is undesirable. It is simply because such change is unpredictable, not subject to rational planning and control. Wittgenstein might well be wrong that there can be no form of rationally directed social reconstruction, but if so, this is an error on his part, not a sign of conservative political values: "Someone can fight, hope & even believe, without believing scientifically" (CV69).

A Conservative Philosophy?

My contention so far is that whatever the *sources* of Wittgenstein's pessimism and anti-scientism, there is no *necessary* connection between either of these attitudes and any particular political alignment. Moreover, there is some reason to think that Wittgenstein's political commitments leaned to the left, rather than to the right—enough reason, at least, that proponents of a conservative interpretation of Wittgenstein's views owe us an alternative explanation of the evidence adduced above.

But there have been other reasons for thinking that Wittgenstein's work has a conservative heart. One might think of the quietism that is recommended by the *Tractatus*,²⁵ which exhorts us not to speak (§7) about matters transcendental—ethics, aesthetics (§6.421), logic (§6.13), the mystical (§6.522). But the re-

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922).

considered thinking of the *Philosophical Investigations* and other late work has also been given conservative interpretations by friends and foes alike. Two things, in particular, have prompted readers to apply the label 'conservative' to this later work: Wittgenstein's anti-theoreticist contention that philosophy "leaves everything as it is" (*PI* §124) and his alleged commitment to some doctrine of the incommensurability of conceptual schemes.

Consider the latter first. J. C. Nyíri, as I noted above, alights on Wittgenstein's affinities with Spengler and other conservative thinkers before going on to suggest that Wittgenstein's later philosophy provided a solution to "the paradox of the neo-conservative position" (56). That paradox, roughly, is that conservatives believe that human beings require "absolute standards" (56) if they are to get on as social beings, but at the same time it is clear that "all absolute standards have perished historically" (56). How is the conservative to motivate adherence to tradition, when it seems that tradition is utterly contingent and vulnerable to change? Wittgenstein's answer, according to Nyíri, is to acknowledge the contingency of our rules and practices, but to argue that "All criticism presupposes a form of life, a language, that is, a tradition of agreements; every judgment is necessarily embedded in traditions" (59). It follows from this, thinks Nyíri, that "traditions cannot be judged" (59). So Wittgenstein's treatment of rule-following as "a custom, an institution, embedded in the agreements, in the correspondences of behaviour within society" (58) can "be regarded as a kind of foundation of conservatism" (61).

In the passages that Nyíri cites, Wittgenstein claims that obeying a rule is a "custom" (*PI* §§198, 199), an "institution" (§199) or a "practice" (§202). These passages have been discussed extensively of late by interpreters of Wittgenstein and by philosophers of language and mind, largely in response to Saul Kripke's provocative book, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*.²⁴ Kripke's view is that Wittgenstein invented "a new form of philosophical scepticism" (7), scepticism about the very possibility of following rules and, as a result, about the very possibility of linguistic meaning, insofar as meaningful utterances belong to rule-governed practices (7–54). Kripke thinks that Wittgenstein, like David Hume, advances

²⁴ Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982).

a “sceptical solution” to his sceptical doubts—not a refutation of those doubts, but a means of coping with them by finding an alternative way to underwrite our ordinary practice of attributing to others and to ourselves a grasp of rules. That solution, very roughly, consists in saying that, although it is never true or false that a given individual follows a rule, we can, nevertheless, be *warranted in asserting* that she follows a rule, provided we see her as a member of a community who is disposed to behave as others are (55–113).

No clear consensus has been reached on these matters, but I find both philosophically and interpretively persuasive a position that has been adopted in opposition to Kripke.²⁵ According to this way of understanding Wittgenstein, the central purpose of his discussion of rule-following is to disabuse us of the idea that understanding a rule is a theoretical enterprise—an enterprise that consists in formulating hypotheses about the content of a rule and then trying to confirm or disconfirm those hypotheses. The crux of Wittgenstein’s view is, rather, that the only criterion for saying that someone has followed a rule lies in her actual *application* of it (*PI* §146). There is no identifying or understanding a rule apart from actual instances of its application and no identifying its instances apart from identifying the relevant rule, as the model of hypothesis and confirmation noted above would require. To treat rules as customs or institutions is to emphasize this need for there to be actual applications of rules if there is to be any understanding of rules. And this, in turn, is to suggest that a prerequisite for understanding a rule is to have a “participant perspective” (Ebbs, 4) on the practices structured by that rule, rather than merely the perspective of the alien social scientist, encountering a strange new culture for the first time.

Indeed, in Baker and Hacker’s version of this story, it is not even clear that rule-following logically requires a tradition in the sense of a *communal* practice. When Wittgenstein tells us that “it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’” because then “thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it” (*PI* §202), he is not arguing that there must be an extant community of

²⁵ See especially G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Scepticism, Rules and Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), but also Gary Ebbs, *Rule-Following and Realism* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 1997) and John McDowell, “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule,” *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998) 221–62.

rule-followers to ground the validity of one's judgments. The point is more simply that any rule that it is possible for me follow must be such that other beings with comparable cognitive endowments and deficiencies could also follow it, *if* there were any others around.²⁶ The prohibition against such a private understanding of a rule does not entail the *presence* of a community of rule-followers. Some actual individual practice, combined with the *possibility* that others could make sense of that practice upon encountering it, is all that is needed to avoid the bizarre sceptical doubts that Kripke emphasizes (Baker and Hacker, 20, 71–80). So Wittgenstein's talk of practices is not concerned with the kind of problem Nyíri presents.

Nyíri also draws attention to Wittgenstein's remark that "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments" (*PI* §242). He takes this claim to entail the invulnerability of traditions to criticism, a reading that amounts to attributing to Wittgenstein a version of the doctrine of the incommensurability of conceptual schemes, as suggested earlier.

But it is at least as plausible to read this passage and related ones as anticipating a point made famous (to philosophers) by Donald Davidson—namely, that the very idea of incommensurable conceptual schemes makes no sense.²⁷ Wittgenstein does not say, "If it is to be possible to *criticize* a culture *as a whole*, then there must be agreement in judgments." He does not say this for very good reasons. If there is agreement in judgments, then there can be no criticism of a culture *as whole* that does not undermine itself by criticizing those very shared judgments that are alleged to make such criticism possible. But then it would be bizarre to claim that such shared judgments make the criticism of entire cultures *possible*. This serves to reinforce the point that criticism of an entire culture or "conceptual scheme" is not something that makes sense. But this is not because it is impossible to make *any* criticism of the practices of other cultures or of holders of other concepts. On the contrary, we can criticize the beliefs and practices of others pre-

²⁶ Readers of Derrida will recognize this theme in, for example, Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," trans. J. Mehlman and S. Weber, *Limited Inc.*, ed. G. Graff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988) 1–23.

²⁷ Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon P. 1984) 183–98.

cisely because we agree with them not only about certain definitions, but about certain judgments as well. Davidson puts the point succinctly:

We are bound to suppose someone we want to understand inhabits our world of macroscopic, more or less enduring, physical objects with familiar causal dispositions; that his world, like ours, contains people with minds and motives; and that he shares with us the desire to find warmth, love, security, and success, and the desire to avoid pain and distress.²⁸

The problem here is not with the possibility of criticizing other beliefs, but with the idea that we can coherently conceive of other persons as sharing *nothing* with us whatsoever. Only then would it seem possible to criticize their culture as whole. But if we shared no beliefs with them at all, we could not even begin to understand them, let alone criticize them, and insofar as we could not even begin to understand them, we would have no reason to count them as persons. So even if one balks at the individualist line taken by Baker and Hacker, there is nothing in the idea of needing a participant perspective that rules out the possibility of criticism. The closest inference we can make is that legitimate criticism presupposes that the critic understand what she is criticizing—hardly an overzealous requirement and certainly no source of solace for Nyíri's conservative.

Now, what of the charge that Wittgenstein's philosophy is conservative because it "may in no way interfere with the actual use of language" (*PI* §124)? I indicated above two important dimensions in which Wittgenstein's views can be seen to converge with those of the Frankfurt School—the dimensions of cultural pessimism and anti-scientism. It is ironic, then, that one of Wittgenstein's most superficial readers should have been Herbert Marcuse. But it is instructive to consider Marcuse's criticisms of Wittgenstein, be-

²⁸ Donald Davidson, "Paradoxes of Irrationality," *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, ed. R. Wollheim and J. Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 289–305. Cf. Wittgenstein, *PI* §206. I compare Wittgenstein and Davidson at greater length in Chapter 5 of *Philosophy and Its Epistemic Neuroses*.

cause they have gone largely undiscussed and because they crystallize a temptation that, I am sure, many other readers still feel upon encountering the criss-crossing text of the *Investigations*. This is the temptation to read Wittgenstein's contention that philosophy "leaves everything as it is" (§124) as a conservative endorsement of the status quo.

Marcuse sees Wittgenstein as a major exponent—along with Austin, Moore and Ryle—of something called "linguistic analysis" (*ODM* 170), a category sufficiently generous, in Marcuse's estimation, also to accommodate the likes of A. J. Ayer, Rudolf Carnap, W. V. Quine, and Bertrand Russell.²⁹ This conflation of divergent philosophical views has troubling consequences. Wittgenstein's occasional analogizing of philosophy to therapy, for example, gets reduced in Marcuse's hands to the view of the logical positivists that philosophy, by being more scientific, can get beyond the superstitions of earlier times: "Linguistic analysis," writes Marcuse, "claims to cure thought and speech from confusing metaphysical notions—from 'ghosts' of a less mature and less scientific past" (170). The Foreword to the *Philosophical Remarks*, considered earlier, should be enough to cast doubt on the suggestion that Wittgenstein held any such view, as would a reading of his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*."³⁰ Since neither of these works was available to Marcuse, he cannot be faulted for not having read them. Nonetheless, his treatment of Wittgenstein goes sadly awry, because he has little appreciation for the differences between the later Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle, let alone the more subtle differences between Wittgenstein and the "ordinary-language" philosophers of Oxford:

Austin's contemptuous treatment of the alternatives to the common usage of words, and his defamation of what we "think up in our armchairs of an afternoon"; Wittgenstein's assurance that philosophy "leaves everything as it is"—such statements

²⁹ Ayer, Carnap and Russell are not explicitly mentioned, but the "neo-positivist critique" (*ODM* 184)—embraced by Ayer and Carnap—and "the present king of France" (187)—an example of Russell's—certainly are.

³⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions*, ed. J. C. Klagge and A. Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993) 119–55.

exhibit, to my mind, academic sado-masochism, self-humiliation, and self-denunciation of the intellectual whose labor does not issue in scientific, technical or like achievements. (*ODM* 173)

This improbable diagnosis is tied to Marcuse's conviction that Wittgenstein (and every other analytical philosopher) embraces positivism, by which he means a conjunction of three theses: "(1) the validation of cognitive thought by experience of facts; (2) the orientation of cognitive thought to the physical sciences as a model of certainty and exactness; (3) the belief that progress in knowledge depends on this orientation" (172). By laying emphasis on positive knowledge, Marcuse thinks, Wittgenstein cuts himself off from speculative thinking, and this is problematical because then "the philosophic critique criticizes *within* the societal framework and stigmatizes non-positive notions as mere speculation, dreams or fantasies" (172).³¹ Critique, thinks Marcuse, must transcend the "societal framework" and not merely reproduce the ruling ideology. But no such thing is forthcoming from Wittgenstein, who thinks that "every sentence in our language 'is in order as it is'" (*PI* §98), and that "we must stick to the subjects of our everyday thinking" (§106). Marcuse sees such expressions as indicating an "almost masochistic reduction of speech to the humble and common" (*ODM* 177; cf. Eagleton, 71), which is "committed with all its concepts to the given state of affairs" and "distrusts the possibilities of a new experience" (*ODM* 178):

One might ask what remains of philosophy? What remains of thinking, intelligence, without anything hypothetical, without any explanation? However, what is at stake is not the definition or the dignity of philosophy. It is rather the chance of preserving and protecting the right, the *need* to think and speak in terms other than those of common usage—terms which are meaningful, rational, and valid precisely because they are other terms. What

³¹ It is worth noting, as we pass, that Ayer and Russell both held left-leaning political views, and that the major figures of the Vienna Circle of logical positivists were socialists (Neurath, Carnap) and left-leaning liberals (Schlick).

is involved is the spread of a new ideology which undertakes to describe what is happening (and meant) by eliminating the concepts capable of understanding what is happening (and meant). (178)

In addition to convicting Wittgenstein of scientism—a charge that should seem implausible in light of earlier considerations—Marcuse makes four serious errors: (i) he mistakes the sense in which Wittgenstein is an “ordinary-language philosopher”; (ii) he fails to recognize the resources that Wittgenstein’s treatment of language makes available for thinking about descriptions of new experiences; (iii) he mistakes restrictions that Wittgenstein places on the proper role of philosophy for restrictions on thinking in general, and, moreover, (iv) he fails to understand those restrictions.

(i) Wittgenstein’s concern about the “ordinary” usage of words is not that we should never depart from such usage, but that when we do depart from it, we keep clearly in mind that we are doing so. It is the failure to keep such departures before our eyes that leads us into philosophical puzzlement. For example, in the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein discusses the Freudian notion of the unconscious by means of an analogy. Suppose that someone complains of suffering from “unconscious toothache.”³² We can imagine adopting this locution to describe having a bad tooth that, at the moment, causes no pain. There is nothing wrong with adopting such a linguistic convention if it is something that we find useful. However, we must not then fall into the trap of supposing that “a stupendous discovery has been made” (*Blue Book* 23)—that we have discovered a new kind of pain that we had hitherto failed to recognize. We should not be misled into thinking that in the cases of conscious toothache and unconscious toothache we are really dealing with the same phenomenon and that it just happens to be the case that some toothaches are conscious and others are not. Likewise, when Freud speaks of unconscious intentional attitudes he offers us a way of talking that may (or may not) prove useful. Perhaps by talking in such a way we are led to improved ways of treating psychological problems. Perhaps Freud discovered “new psychological reactions” (57) that can be usefully explained by

³² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and the Brown Books*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969) 22f.

invoking the vocabulary of intentional attitudes. However, we get ourselves into philosophical troubles when we slip from this pragmatic adoption of a new and useful way of describing certain phenomena, into thinking that we are dealing with two species of the same genus: intentional attitudes that are conscious and intentional attitudes that are unconscious. When we make that conflation, we are led to wonder how a thought can be unconscious or, conversely, how we can trust our expressions of *any* of our intentional attitudes. ("If some of them can be unconscious, couldn't they all be?") Wittgenstein wants to place a prohibition, not on using old words in new ways, nor even on using new words, but simply on failing to recognize when we have begun to *extend* an "ordinary" concept into a *new* context of application.

(ii) But the fact that we need to keep track of our extensions of concepts in order to avoid philosophical confusion gives the lie to Marcuse's contention that Wittgenstein "distrusts the possibilities of a new experience" (*ODM* 178). Indeed, it is a central feature of Wittgenstein's treatment of language that our cognitive practices are contingent through and through. Even in mathematics, Wittgenstein thinks, we alter our concepts: "Why do we call something a 'number'? Well, perhaps because it has a—direct—relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre" (*PI* §67).

This is no incidental facet of his philosophy. It is built into his treatment of concepts in terms of family resemblances (*PI* §§65–77) that the reason we apply a general term to a range of instances is very often not that those instances share any one thing in common, but that *new* instances strike us as similar to old ones in *new* ways. Sometimes these extensions of a concept will seem so natural that the dissimilarities between old and new will not immediately strike us. (And in such cases, our "craving for generality" (*Blue Book* 17f.) may tempt us to think that we have a concept whose application is delineated by necessary and sufficient conditions.) But in other cases, the new application suggested will be jarring in some way. Apply the term 'iron' to yet another lump of rock with atomic number 26, and no one will take notice. But apply that term to a fist or a will or a resolve, and a whole way of seeing and thinking can be altered. Apply the term 'person' to women or blacks or indigenous peoples, apply the term 'rape' to

forcible sex between a married couple, apply the term 'romance' to relations between people of the same sex, and whole ways of *acting* are called into question. As Richard Rorty has argued, the application of a description that "initially sound[s] crazy" can expand logical space, providing *reasons* for objecting to practices that were once taken for granted and reasons for embracing practices that were once viewed with revulsion or suspicion.³³

(iii) The fact that we need to keep track of our extensions of our concepts, in order to avoid philosophical confusion, also makes it clear that whatever restrictions Wittgenstein thinks appropriate here, they are not restrictions on what we are allowed to *think*. To revert to my earlier example, if it is genuinely useful to describe a person's behaviour in terms of unconscious intentional attitudes—if such descriptions help her to lead a less troubled life—then that is justification enough. The only thing that Wittgenstein hopes to prevent is our confusing this new locution with our old one.

(iv) But there is nothing harmful in trying to prevent such confusions even when one is not doing philosophy, but, say biology, or physics, or (perhaps) critical theory of society. Marcuse's failure to see this is the result of his failure to recognize the nature of those restrictions. Indeed, a closer look at Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy suggests that, far from being conservative at its core, his approach harmonizes quite well with one traditional theme of radical theory, the critique of ideology. I shall conclude by turning to an examination of this harmony.

Wittgenstein and the Critique of Ideology

The term 'ideology' has a checkered past and too many uses for comfort, some critical, some quite value-neutral. The use to which I shall put the term takes inspiration from the writings of Marx and Engels, but its significance is not structured by any commitment to dialectical materialism, nor by any thesis regarding the priority of economic class as a critical category over other critical

³³ Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," *Radical Philosophy* 59 (Autumn, 1991): 3. I do not want to overstate the similarities between Rorty and Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein gives no extended treatment of figurative language, and I suspect that he would have found Rorty's non-cognitive account of metaphor acceptable only in part. On how Rorty's approach might be modified see Michael Hymers, "Metaphor, Cognitivity and Meaning-Holism," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 31.4 (1998): 266–82.

categories such as gender or ethnicity or sexuality, and I am ultimately not concerned with whether the account that I offer provides the best reading of Marx's texts, though I am inclined to think that it captures a great deal.

Let me try to be a little less coy about all this. In their collaborative works from *The German Ideology* to the "Communist Manifesto," Marx and Engels present an account of ideology according to which any ruling class, in order to maintain power, is compelled "to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society."³⁴ Insofar as a given social order satisfies the interests of a class, it will be in the interests of that class to represent that order as necessary and unchangeable. This ensures stability of the existing relations of production from which the ruling class benefits. But because social orders *have* been changeable and contingent, such a representation has always involved distortion. It has required representing what is local and contingent as universal and necessary. The ruling class "has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones" (*German Ideology* 66). What is supposed to be unique about the proletariat is that their interests are very nearly continuous with those of all society. "The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority."³⁵ Consequently, the representation of those interests as universal will involve only minimal distortion, so that with the envisioned withering-away of the State under communism will come a withering-away of ideology, "as soon as it is no longer necessary to represent a particular interest as general" (*German Ideology* 66).

This picture of ideology portrays it as an abuse of abstraction that falsely universalizes and essentializes the local and contingent features of a given social order in a way that stabilizes that social order and protects the interests of those who benefit from its persistence. So put, the notion of ideology is not intrinsically Marxist. It becomes Marxist only once we specify that the relevant social

³⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology: Part One with Selections from Parts Two and Three and Supplementary Texts*, ed. C. J. Arthur, trans. R. Pascal (New York: International Publishers, 1970) 65f.

³⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," *Karl Marx Selected Writings*, ed. D. McLellan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 221–47.

groups are economic classes, and once we further insist that history is a dialectical process in which the means of production and the relations of production are the primary determinants.³⁶

If we refrain from adding this Marxist content, we are left with a more general notion, but not one that is so vague as to be useless. Ideology can still be seen to play the role of stabilizing social relations by dampening social criticism and by undermining those self-descriptions that members of oppressed groups might find liberating. And it can be seen to do so by falsely universalizing and essentializing the local and the contingent.

Wittgenstein offers here a philosophical view that reminds us that concepts need not be justified in their application by any interesting set of necessary and sufficient conditions, and he spurns metaphysical talk of essences. Wittgenstein's anti-scientism is a facet of this anti-essentialism. Indeed, his whole attitude toward philosophy could be said to rest on a rejection of the ideology of scientism.

The ideology of scientism falsely universalizes the local by representing all knowledge as scientific knowledge, and it falsely essentializes science by implicitly assuming a solution to the problem of demarcation. It assumes that some set of conditions is non-trivially necessary and sufficient to distinguish all and only science from non-science. It assumes, we might say, that science is itself a natural kind. There have been numerous proposals concerning how to solve the problem of demarcation. The one that seems to be the object of Wittgenstein's critique is, roughly, a criterion of testability. Science, on this view, is characterized by the method of hypothesis and confirmation or disconfirmation, and scientism amounts to seeing this method as the model for all claims to knowledge.³⁷

³⁶ The Marxist thesis that "consciousness" is determined "by life" (*German Ideology* 47) is best thought of as a thesis about the cultural or political selection of ideas—a thesis about the survival and propagation of ideas suited to maintaining the status quo. On this view, thought is not merely an epiphenomenon of "material behaviour" (47), but the history of ideas is the history of their sociopolitical survival and adaptivity in material circumstances.

³⁷ This blurs some niceties of which I do not want to be thought ignorant, so let me say that in what follows I treat both observation-statements (*e.g.*, statements about laboratory instrument-readings) and theory statements (*e.g.*, statements about unobservable entities like electrons), as hypotheses that can be confirmed or disconfirmed. The logical positivists sharply distinguished these two kinds of statements, but they did so primarily on grounds that the former could be *immediately* confirmed by sense-experience, whereas the latter could be only *mediately* con-

Against this view we might hold a picture of science as a set of practices that share no common essence, but that resemble one another in various ways without constituting a natural kind.³⁸ Such a strategy is quite compatible with much of what Wittgenstein wants to hold, I think. But Wittgenstein emphasizes rejecting the idea that everything we know we know on the basis of hypothesis and confirmation. (Of course, he does not reject the idea that there are some—indeed, many—things that we know on the basis of hypothesis and confirmation. The point is merely that this model is not to be applied universally.) In contrast with W. V. Quine, who treats all statements as hypotheses, whose relative immunity to revision in the case of truths of logic and mathematics, for example, is determined by pragmatic criteria, not by any principled distinction between analytic and synthetic truths, Wittgenstein insists on the importance of not confusing empirical propositions, which are subject to confirmation and disconfirmation, with “grammatical” truths, which function as the rules by which such (dis)confirmation is to be carried out. There is, he concedes, no sharp boundary between “the movement of the waters on the river-bed [of thoughts] and the shift of the bed itself,”³⁹ but this is not because, as in Quine’s case, no proposition is “immune to revision.”⁴⁰ Rather, it is because one and the same proposition can, in one context, function as a rule for testing and, in another, as a proposition to be tested (*On Certainty* §98). But even this limited fluidity does not affect some rules, such as those given by mathematical propositions, which “might be said to be fossilized” (§657).

Although it is primarily in his final writings that he discusses this distinction, it—or something very like it—is of central importance to the whole philosophical project on which he embarked

firmed by way of experimental protocols. This is compatible with calling both kinds “hypotheses.” Part of my motivation for using this terminology is to suggest a link with the later views of Quine, whom I mention below. For *one* statement of the logical positivists’ views see Rudolf Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language” *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959), 60–81.

³⁸ See Richard Rorty, “Is Natural Science a Natural Kind?” *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 46–62.

³⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. Von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969) §97.

⁴⁰ W. V. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980) 43.

after he returned to Cambridge in 1929. Earlier we encountered part of a variant draft of the Foreword for his *Philosophical Remarks*. In the version that was actually incorporated into that work he writes:

This book is written for such men as are in sympathy with its spirit. This spirit is different from the one which informs the vast stream of European and American civilization in which all of us stand. That spirit expresses itself in an onwards movement, in building ever larger and more complicated structures; the other in striving after clarity and perspicuity in no matter what structure. (PR 7)

In *Culture and Value* the variant draft expresses Wittgenstein's distaste for both the "Fascism and Socialism" of his age and later continues:

It is all one to me whether the typical western scientist understands or appreciates my work since in any case he does not understand the spirit in which I write.

... I am aiming at something different than are the scientists & my thoughts move differently than do theirs. (CV9)

It may seem improbable that the spirit in which Wittgenstein was writing was fundamentally at odds with the view that all knowledge is had on the basis of hypothesis and confirmation, given that Wittgenstein was flirting at this time (1929–30) with what soon became the logical positivists' verification theory of meaning. According to that view (PR §225), the meaning of a statement is its method of verification, statements that share a method of verification are synonymous, and statements that cannot be empirically verified are meaningless. But the flirtation was a brief one—so much so that Wittgenstein was later reluctant to acknowledge that it took place (Monk, *Wittgenstein* 287f.). What seems to have shifted Wittgenstein's attitude regarding the verification-theory is the recognition that the verifiability (or "confirmability," which is a weaker notion) of a proposition gives us information about only one of the

many ways in which words are *used* (287f.)¹¹—use being the primary determinant of meaning in Wittgenstein's later views. I maintain that, once this door was opened for Wittgenstein, the spirit in which he wrote forced him through it, and what lay on the other side was a view of science as just one set amongst many of our epistemic and linguistic practices.

One way to summarize his criticisms of traditional philosophy is to say that it falls prey to a scientific temptation to think of concepts like "knowledge," "truth" and "meaning" as fit objects for a theoretical investigation, an investigation that begins with the assumption, tacit or otherwise, that such terms designate phenomena with hidden natures awaiting our discovery. The process of discovering those hidden natures begins by advancing *hypotheses*, for which there may be rivals, and then trying to determine which hypotheses most thoroughly and convincingly account for all the evidence. But such an approach, thinks Wittgenstein, mistakes *grammatical propositions*—propositions that give rules for the standard uses of terms like 'knowledge,' 'truth' and 'meaning'—for *hypotheses*, thereby conflating those propositions to be tested with the rules for their testing, and it fails to keep in clear view the many different contexts in which a term may have a function.

Wittgenstein often explains his approach by appeal to spatial and geographical metaphors. Thus, in his lectures from the early 1930s he asserts, "In philosophy we are not laying foundations but tidying up a room, in the process of which we have to touch everything a dozen times."¹² In the Preface to the *Investigations* he indicates that the "very nature of the investigation ... compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction. The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings" (ix). What matters here is approaching the same points "afresh from different directions" (ix)

¹¹ This claim is lent credence by the fact that although meaning and use get connected in *Philosophical Remarks* (§14), that connection begins to be elaborated only in *Philosophical Grammar* (e.g., 59f., 64f., 67f.), written from 1932–34. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. R. Rhees, trans. A. J. P. Kenny (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974).

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1930–32*, ed. D. Lee (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 24; see also 42.

in order to get “a picture of the landscape” (ix). “Our language,” he goes on to say, “can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses” (§18). And later: “Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from *one* side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about” (§203). “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about’” (§123). We fail to recognize when we have abandoned one context for another, when we have taken a fork in the road and wandered from a main thoroughfare into a less-used side-street. We keep looking for the museum on our right and, when we find another building, think that somehow it *must* be the museum. What we need here are helpful directions, better street-signs—“reminders for a particular purpose” (§127)—or, better yet, a good map that will allow us “to get a synoptic view [*leicht zu übersehen*]”⁴³ of our situation. “The concept of a perspicuous representation [*übersichtliche Darstellung*],” Wittgenstein observes, “is of fundamental significance for us” (*PI* §122).

Failing to get a synoptic view of our language is a source of philosophical puzzles because it prevents us from recognizing when we have stumbled from one context of application to another. But it also tempts us draw an analogy with scientific investigation, for we are inclined to think that whatever we cannot quickly account for in our array of concepts must be amenable to investigation by the model of hypothesis and confirmation. The problem gets started because we do not need to be able to describe clearly the use of a word in order to be able to use it. Take one of Wittgenstein’s most revealing examples:

One learns the word “think,” i.e. its use, under certain circumstances, which, however, one does not learn to describe.

⁴³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology. Volume II*, ed. G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980), §20. See also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. Von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981) §113.

But I can teach a person the use of the word!
 For a description of those circumstances is not
 needed for that.

I just teach him the word under particular
 circumstances. (*Zettel* §§114–16)

Ordinarily, what matters are the circumstances in which we learn to employ the word ‘think,’ and we are ordinarily adept at recognizing when those circumstances obtain, even if we can give no clear description of them. But when we ask ourselves what thinking *is*, we discover that no answer is forthcoming, and we are tempted to suppose that this case must be like the case in which someone asks what gravity is or what the stars are made of or why the night sky is so dark. We look for an underlying phenomenon that would *explain* the object of our puzzlement. We look for a hidden *essence*. But this, thinks Wittgenstein, merely leads us into further and deeper puzzlement.

Thus, when we think of meaning and understanding as natural phenomena to be investigated by the technique of hypothesis and confirmation, we find ourselves led into the sorts of sceptical difficulties that Kripke expresses about the possibility of linguistic meaning. If I know what rules I follow by formulating hypotheses about my behaviour and then testing those hypotheses, I find that *indefinitely many* different hypotheses are compatible with any finite series of behaviour. And there is no way of saying which one of these hypotheses is the correct one. But, contrary to Kripke’s reading, Wittgenstein is not arguing for a sceptical position about meaning and rules; he is trying to show us how scientific assumptions in the philosophy of language lead to absurdity. If we refuse to accept the analogy with natural phenomena, then we are in a position to view terms like ‘meaning,’ ‘rule’ and ‘understanding’ as closer in kind to terms that designate *artifacts*, and the appropriate way to examine an artifact is to consider what role or purpose it serves in the practices of the people who use it. We find ourselves engaged in a *grammatical* investigation, one that seeks a “synoptic view” of how such words function, of what job(s) they do for us. And when we have such a view, Wittgenstein thinks, we shall see that, “if the words ‘language,’ ‘experience,’ ‘world,’ have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words ‘table,’ ‘lamp,’ ‘door’” (*PI* §97).

A person's inability to find her way out of philosophical puzzlement is not simply an individual failing: "Language sets everyone the same traps; it is an immense network of well kept wrong turnings" (CV25). But precisely because our language is a product of time and chance and a *few* natural dispositions (e.g., our tendency to follow a pointing finger from arm to finger-tip and beyond), we should not suppose that such problems are simply natural and inevitable. That is why a change at the cultural level—"an alteration in the mode of life of human beings" (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, 132)—or at least human beings with a particular sort of cultural heritage—could bring about the results that Wittgenstein wanted from his philosophical work. To repeat: "It is not by any means clear to me, that I wish for a continuation of my work by others, more than a change in the way we live, making all these questions superfluous" (CV70).

The making of certain philosophical questions superfluous does not amount to making *all* philosophical questions superfluous. If philosophical problems have deep cultural roots, then it is entirely possible that a change in the mode of life of human beings may trade in one set of philosophical problems for another. Philosophical work, in this view, "has no end" (*Zettel* §447), even if it has temporary resting places where our thoughts are "at peace" (CV50). And in hoping that certain philosophical questions will become superfluous, Wittgenstein is not, as Marcuse charges, cutting himself off from speculative thinking, since Wittgenstein does not think of philosophy as involving the sort of speculative thinking that Marcuse prizes, to begin with. This, in turn, may raise a question about Wittgenstein's attitude toward the critical theory of society, and this would surely return us to Wittgenstein's pessimism about the prospects of social theory in general. But remember that such pessimism signals a *similarity* between Wittgenstein and Marcuse, not a difference.

Insofar as we can see Western philosophy from the ancients to contemporary times as pursuing the same problems, or something *like* them, it should be clear just how enormous the cultural change to which Wittgenstein gestures would have to be. Perhaps this helps to explain Wittgenstein's pessimism. But the enormity of the task has not prevented radical critics from having doubts about the cultural prestige of science and technology. One difficulty in developing such doubts is not to confuse scientism with

other doctrines with which it is frequently allied—realism, for example—and be driven, as a result, to advocate a version of relativism or idealism. Another difficulty is to undermine the cultural authority of science without simply embracing irrationality. Wittgenstein, I think, shows us how we might do both. For giving up the idea that science and knowledge are natural kinds does not require giving up on the reality or objectivity of knowledge, scientific or otherwise. To suppose that it does is to fall prey to a subtler form of the ideology of scientism.⁴⁴

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