Wittgenstein, sometimes

by Bernd Frohmann

Wittgenstein and His Times. Edited by Brian McGuinness. Oxford: Basil Blackwell; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. £8.50. US$15.00. Pp. vi, 122.

Wittgenstein and His Times collects five previously published papers that "attempt to tease out Wittgenstein's central or characteristic attitude, his Weltanschauung" by showing "the agreement and difference between Wittgenstein's thought and the thought of some who were in a broad sense his contemporaries" (p. v). The enterprise remains speculative even after the publication of *Vermischte Bemerkungen*,[1] because Wittgenstein's silence on topics he considered remote from fundamental questions in philosophy often seems to present a greater interpretive challenge than his few cryptic offerings. Furthermore, placing Wittgenstein in intellectual history is difficult because it demands a critical and philosophical evaluation of his view that his own philosophy is radically different from that of his predecessors. (Not the least of the benefits of the exercise would be a contribution toward assessing Russell's well-known dismissal of Wittgenstein's later thought.[2]) The contributors to this volume try to elucidate the *Weltanschauung* of Wittgenstein's later thought by offering their speculations on his political attitude, his understanding of myth and ritual, and his relation to philosophy and psychoanalysis.

The topic of Anthony Kenny's lead article, "Wittgenstein on the Nature of Philosophy", is too often ignored by attention to Wittgenstein's contributions to more technical subjects. Kenny's subject is the role of philosophy in everyday life. Wittgenstein says that philosophy has a practical use as a tool against *the philosopher in us*. For Kenny, this means that philosophy can be used to qualify people for scientific inquiry and to provide a defence against theological mystifications and pseudo-scientific explanations.

Kenny's interpretation ignores Wittgenstein's well-documented anti-scientism. Although Wittgenstein undoubtedly felt, as Kenny points out, that mathematics and psychology would be transformed by the kind

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, edited by Georg Henrik von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977). Translated by Peter Winch as *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[2] *My Philosophical Development* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959). See pp. 216–17.

of analysis he teaches, it is doubtful that benefit to science accurately represents the advantage to the ordinary person that Wittgenstein might have intended for his philosophy.

Wittgenstein's later writings are dominated by a very powerful sense of both the debilitating force of conceptual confusion and the correspondingly powerful liberation from grammatical illusion. Kenny's interpretation does justice to neither, because he limits philosophy's benefits to a social class sufficiently privileged by educational and economic advantage to concern themselves with theological and pseudo-scientific mythologies. A fallacy of equivocation infects the argument. Although he sees that for Wittgenstein, confusion comes when language idles but not when imbedded in what Wittgenstein calls *practice*, Kenny is led to the false conclusion that philosophy has little effect on daily *practical life*. Then there appears the problem of how freedom from illusions created by idling language can be of any practical help to people, with the inevitable answer that philosophy can help only idling people. But illusion-free linguistic *practice* is not the same as confusion-free *practical life*. The practical life of human beings includes the thousands of activities making up their daily round. It includes much more than what Wittgenstein understands by *practice*.

If philosophy has the practical use that Wittgenstein contends, then an analysis is required of how the metaphysical pictures, or grammatical fictions, endemic to idling language have effects on how people live. Idling language may throw a spanner in the work and play of daily practical life. The force that one feels in Wittgenstein's thought is understood by seeing how the metaphysical pictures imbedded in our language foul up our relationships with our neighbours, friends, family, lovers, and ourselves. Not the least of the advantages of Kenny's otherwise clear and admirable essay is to point toward a neglected but fertile area of Wittgensteinian interpretation.

In "Freud and Wittgenstein", Brian McGuinness tries to clarify Wittgenstein's puzzling remark that he considered himself a follower of Freud. For Wittgenstein, Freudian analysis offers the patient a mythology. McGuinness explains Wittgenstein's notion of a mythology by contrasting it to science and comparing it with ritual. Unlike scientific theories, Freudian analyses are not causal hypotheses. They are more like coherent stories developed from the incoherent, fragmentary and incomplete data supplied by the patient. The criteria of Freudian analysis (its acceptance by the patient and the therapist, and its favourable outcome for the patient) allow two logically incompatible but equally correct analyses, thereby showing that for Freudian analysis, unlike for science, the *truth* of the hypothesis is not its point. (Or, whatever counts

as truth in Freudian analysis is very different from what counts as truth in science.)

McGuinness sees the similarity between Freudian analysis and ritual in their appeal to "something universal in the human spirit" (p. 38). Freud laid down some general rules for working the patient's data into a compelling story that people are ready to accept. The kind of understanding offered by Freudian analysis consists in the recognition and acceptance of an attractive mythology, very much like the recognition of a word when you are writing something and suddenly say "*That's* it, *that's* what I wanted to say" (p. 30). Freud's achievement consists not just in finding a method to construct compelling mythologies, but also in showing, and it is very remarkable, that in many instances the acceptance of the mythology brings relief from anxieties and neuroses.

Wittgenstein's philosophical method differs in a very fundamental way from Freudian analysis. McGuinness emphasizes that Wittgenstein's aim is to expose mythologies and bring about a liberation from the conceptual confusions they produce. He illustrates his point with the familiar example of the grammatical illusion involved in the expression "to mean". Philosophical reflection on meaning and intending is often mystified by the picture of meaning as a "magical connection" between a speaker and what he means (pp. 41–2). The mythology is exposed by a careful grammatical investigation aimed at seeing how the expression works in the practice of human speech far removed from philosophical speculation.

A major obstacle to understanding Wittgenstein's remark that he considered himself a follower of Freud lies in seeing how a thinker who aims at destroying myths can consider himself a follower of one he sees as a propounder of myths. McGuinness's paper sets the problem but does little to solve it. His analogies between the two thinkers are lame in comparison to the contrasts he so skilfully develops. We are told, for example, that both thinkers try to reach depths below surface interpretations. But Freud's plumbing of the depths consists in presenting a mythology that he claims lurks beneath the surface of the data supplied by the patient, whereas Wittgenstein's method aims at revealing that depth grammar involves no mythology. We are told that both thinkers agree that "meaning is not there all at once" (p. 40). But in Freudian analysis the meaning that is eventually accepted by the patient consists in a mythology worked into the data provided, whereas in Wittgensteinian analysis, the expression causing conceptual confusion is eventually stripped of the mythology suggested by its surface grammar. McGuinness's paper highlights just those contrasts between Wittgenstein and Freud that leave Wittgenstein's remark as puzzling as ever.

J. C. Nyíri's aim in "Wittgenstein's Later Work in Relation to Conservatism" is to present "the later Wittgenstein as belonging to a constellation of conservative thinkers" (p. 45). His method could prove Marx a fascist or Kropotkin a Czarist. Wittgenstein's known admiration for the Elder Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov* is offered as evidence of reverence for authoritarian institutions (p. 49). Ungrounded speculation that Wittgenstein might have read Moeller van den Bruck's and Dmitri Mereschkowski's editions of *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment* leads Nyíri to conclude not only that Wittgenstein fell in with their conservative sentiments but also that they "certainly played a role in connection with Wittgenstein's well-known yearning for Russia" (p. 51). Wittgenstein's yearning is not quite so well known as Nyíri supposes, because while he has Wittgenstein yearn for the conservative fantasy of a spiritual Russia, the saviour of Europe, Brian McGuinness sees Wittgenstein as yearning for the Soviet Union established by the Russian revolution. After Nyíri's admission that he has no evidence that Wittgenstein read anything by Paul Ernst other than his foreword to *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Nyíri offers Ernst's dissapointments in a paper called "What Now?" that modern bourgeois life is "no longer determined by fixed consitions [*sic*], like the life of the bees" (p. 61) as the "conservative context" influencing Wittgenstein's later thought. Wittgenstein's remarks in his *Wörterbuch für Volksschulen* on the importance of a dictionary for correct spelling are taken to support "one of the basic ideas of conservativism", "the idea that true freedom—even that of the spirit—cannot but consist in a kind of restraint" (pp. 49–50). Curiosity about why Wittgenstein returned to philosophical work in 1929 rather than, say, 1925, is put to rest by citing important events belonging to the "heyday and collapse of Austrian and German neo-conservativism between 1927 and 1933" (p. 54). Not only did the *Zeitgeist* of conservativism spirit Wittgenstein to Cambridge precisely in 1929, but also ensured that "two full years elapsed before Wittgenstein in Cambridge found the subjects and the style which were to become characteristic of his later period" (*ibid.*), presumably to allow sufficient time for conservative classics such as Musil's *Man without Qualities* (1930), Spengler's *Der Mensch und der Technik* (1931) and Grabowsky's "Conservativism" (1931) to wield their silent and mysterious influence.

Nyíri's substantive claim, that "Wittgenstein's conceptual analysis can in fact be regarded as a kind of foundation of conservativism" (p. 61), is equally unconvincing. That they can be so regarded is proven conclusively by Mr. Nyíri's so regarding them, but his point is never made plausible. After observing that the basic concepts in Wittgenstein's "new framework" are "training and behaviour, use, custom, institution, prac-

tice, technique, agreement" (p. 58), Nyíri interprets Wittgenstein's notion of the groundlessness of rule-following (*Philosophical Investigations,* §219) as prohibiting criticism of existing social institutions. Wittgenstein's formal and logical (he would say, grammatical) investigation of rule-following does not imply, as Nyíri supposes, that existing social and political institutions are immune from criticism and must be "obeyed blindly". Wittgenstein's insistence on the impossibility of a metaphysical grounding for grammatical statements, such as "2002 follows 2000 in the +2 series", applies to all language, irrespective of its employment to support or oppose existing institutions. Indeed, and it is a point often missed by Wittgenstein's leftist critics, Wittgenstein's silence on the empirical determinants of language opens rather than closes the door for a materialist analysis of language. The critique of ideological hegemony, for example, depends upon a denial that language has the metaphysical base that Wittgenstein sought to expose as an illusion.

Nyíri's view that the *Lebensformen* in which our language is imbedded are social structures is shared by G. H. von Wright in "Wittgenstein in Relation to His Times". But contrary to Nyíri, von Wright concludes that Wittgenstein's aim of disspelling conceptual confusion implies a radical change in our social institutions. He is led to this conclusion by considering an important problem in Wittgensteinian interpretation. There is no doubt that Wittgenstein believed in a deep sickness pervading the way we live, and von Wright suggests, plausibly I think, that Wittgenstein's efforts at clarity be seen as his response to it. Since language produces confusion, and since "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life", von Wright concludes that freedom from confusion must involve a change in the way we live. He writes:

> Because of the interlocking of language and ways of life, a disorder in the former reflects disorder in the latter. If philosophic problems are symptomatic of language producing malignant outgrowths which obscure our thinking, then there must be a cancer in the *Lebensweise*, in the way of life itself. (P. 119)

Von Wright fails to acknowledge a major obstacle to his interpretation. If conceptual confusion and *Lebensformen* were linked as he suggests, then one would expect Wittgenstein to employ the concept of *Lebensformen* to explain conceptual confusion. But he does not employ it in this way. On the contrary, he uses it to illuminate sense rather than nonsense. He asks his reader to consider *Lebensformen*, or the concrete context of a linguistic practice, in order to gain a "perspicuous representation" of our grammar. The overview thus achieved is the goal of Wittgenstein's

method of grammatical investigation. The purpose of the exercise is to show the contrast between confusion-free linguistic practice and the illusions that arise when language idles, "goes on holiday", or is removed from concrete practice. If attention to *Lebensformen* is part of the process of dissolving conceptual confusion, then it is implausible to interpret Wittgenstein as grounding confusion in our *Lebensformen*.

In "Wittgenstein on Language and Ritual", Rush Rhees considers several important and interesting themes in Wittgenstein's "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*": ritual as language, the "magical" vs. the "logical" conception of signs, whether ritual, like metaphysics, rests on a misunderstanding of the logic of our language, "misleading pictures" in ritual, the portrayal of a wish in the practice of magic, the confusion of what belongs to a symbolism with what is expresed in it, the depth of the impression on us of the Beltane fire-festivals, and the spirit of a myth, of a civilization, and of Wittgenstein's own writing. By placing Wittgenstein's remarks in the context of other manuscript writings of the same period, Rhees shows that the same philosophical concerns animate both his later philosophy and his criticisms of Frazer.

An especially important theme is the misunderstanding of the logic of our language. Rhees suggests a connection between the "magical" conception of signs, in which the sense of a sentence is imagined as "something which is 'there' where the sentence is" (p. 73) and the "misleading picture" in the scapegoat ritual. If, as Wittgenstein holds, the practice of magic portrays a wish, and if the temptation of the "magical" conception of signs is especially strong in the expression of a wish, then the scapegoat ritual might rest on the misunderstanding that the purification sought through the ritual is "something which is there, where the expression of the ritual is". The purification from sin, that is, might be taken as belonging to the symbolism rather than as something expressed by it. This confusion may lead to thinking that the purification sought might be brought about simply by practising the ritual.

Rhees could contribute to the clarification of grammatical fictions or metaphysical pictures, a neglected area of Wittgensteinian interpretation, by a plausible account of the way in which a "false picture" might be involved in the practice of ritual. But his contribution to solving the interpretive problems he raises is limited by the form of his essay. It reads more like an evocation of relationships between Wittgensteinian themes than an argued interpretation. Rhees's hermeneutics consists in a meditation on an ever shifting and unstable mutual reflection of Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer and other manuscript writings of the same period. The reader is offered an intellectual free association of very self-consciously tentative hints and suggestions as to what Wittgenstein might have meant or how we might be led to consider some fruitful and some bogus interpretations. His virtuoso performance as a scholar thoroughly familiar with the published and unpublished manuscripts amounts at times to something like a deconstruction of Wittgenstein's thought. The juxtaposition of possible interpretations is like disassembling a radio. If you're not sure how the thing works, then one approach is to loosen a bolt here, unscrew a part there, give what's left a few slaps and shakes until it falls apart, and then lay out the pieces next to one another, sometimes comparing them to others you've kept in a drawer. A certain clarity results, but it's not the clarity of a true signal.

In his discussion of the scapegoat ritual, for example, Rhees first raises the problem of ritual's resting on "false pictures", or misunderstandings of the logic of our language. Very quickly, the problem becomes whether there is a misunderstanding involved in *our* thinking that the ritual might show a confusion between what belongs to a symbolism and what is expressed in it. The confusion is detached from the discussion of the ritual and is visited upon its interrogation. And then we are told that it is possible to be confused about the confusion, especially in thinking it more fundamental than another kind of confusion. The effect of removing the issue of the misunderstanding of the logic of our language from Wittgenstein's text is to mystify the interpretive problem. At most, Rhees's essay is a useful pointer to future work and a stimulus to independent thought about the very important questions he considers.

Rhees's paper has the same virtues as the collection itself. It poses some questions that are worth pursuing, but does little to answer them in a convincing way. This reader is tempted to see the volume as a product of what Carlin Romano has called "the Wittgenstein Industry".[3] Literary products seem not to be exceptions to the general truth that quality is the price of increased production.

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[3] Carlin Romano, "The Wittgenstein Industry", *The Village Voice Literary Supplement*, no. 9 (Aug. 1982): 8–12.