**Speaking for Oneself. Wittgenstein, Nabokov and Sartre on How (Not) to Be a Philistine**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this article is twofold. First, I want to offer an introduction of and a comparison between three accounts of philistinism. Secondly, I show how the phenomenon of philistinism, a failure to speak for oneself, helps to develop an original perspective on Wittgenstein’s moral thought. It is often claimed that Wittgenstein’s personal ethics were quite unorthodox because he repeatedly seems to have supported destruction, war and slavery. I argue that, in the light of my discussion of philistinism, the remarks upon which such conclusions are based should be read differently.

In his biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ray Monk recounts a story told by Paul Engelmann: ‘When, in the twenties, Russell wanted to establish, or join, a “World Organization for Peace and Freedom” or something similar, 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!”’[[1]](#footnote-1) This story has puzzled many commentators. Some suggest that Wittgenstein might have been joking and stress that his moral outlook ‘could not conceivably rank’ ‘vocal support for peace and freedom’ ‘below an equally vocal support for war and slavery’.[[2]](#footnote-2) ‘Why’, Duncan Richter asks, ‘might someone support war, slavery, even death?’ Partly on the basis of the story, Richter concludes that Wittgenstein’s personal ethics were ‘quite unorthodox’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Similarly, Monk sees the story as a ‘complete repudiation of the ethical view’ upon which Russell was going to base the rest of his life’s activities.[[4]](#footnote-4)

I will argue that what Wittgenstein says in Engelmann’s story does not have to be read as supporting war or slavery, even if he was not joking. The story can be interpreted in such a way as to highlight a prominent aspect of Wittgenstein’s moral thinking: the need to speak for oneself. The moral demand to speak for oneself is not an unorthodox demand at all, and many thinkers have recognized its importance. I will bring together three contemporary writers (Wittgenstein, Vladimir Nabokov and Jean-Paul Sartre) from very different milieus and intellectual traditions who I take to have been particularly sensitive to the moral demand to speak for oneself, and who, moreover, have all associated the failure to live up to this demand with the phenomenon of *philistinism.*

In the first two sections, I will introduce Nabokov’s and Sartre’s views on philistinism.[[5]](#footnote-5) Although other authors discuss philistinism as well, I believe that Nabokov’s and Sartre’s views offer an illuminating context for discussion of Wittgenstein’s remark. In the third section, I will show how these views allow us to read Wittgenstein’s reaction to Russell’s plan as an admonition to speak for himself. The aim of the article is thus twofold. First, it wants to offer an introduction to and a comparison between three accounts of philistinism that I consider to be philosophically interesting in themselves. Secondly, by placing Wittgenstein’s remark to Russell in an unusual surrounding, by comparing it to cases we are not used to compare it with (which is, according to Wittgenstein, what we should do with philosophical problems),[[6]](#footnote-6) it hopes to shed light on some remarks of Wittgenstein that have puzzled many commentators, and thus to provide an original perspective on Wittgenstein’s moral thought.

1. **Nabokov on Philistinism**

In the 1950s, Nabokov taught European and Russian literature in the United States. Once a year, as part of his course, he devoted a widely attended lecture to what he called philistinism.[[7]](#footnote-7) In ‘Philistines and Philistinism’, a posthumously published version of his preparations for the lecture, Nabokov defines philistinism as follows: ‘A philistine is a full-grown person whose interests are of a material and commonplace nature, and whose mentality is formed of the stock ideas and conventional ideals of his or her group or time.’[[8]](#footnote-8) Apart from ‘philistinism’, Nabokov uses ‘*bourgeois*’ for largely the same phenomenon. ‘The term “*bourgeois*” I use following Flaubert, not Marx. “*Bourgeois*” in Flaubert’s sense is a state of mind, not a state of pocket.’[[9]](#footnote-9)

A philistine is not a primitive. Philistinism ‘presupposes a certain advanced state of civilization where throughout the ages certain traditions have accumulated in a heap and have started to stink’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Philistinism is international, not bound to a society, a class or a historical period. A good synonym is the Russian word ‘*poshlost*’, mockingly transcribed by Nabokov as ‘poshlust’.[[11]](#footnote-11) *Poshlost* is translated in dictionaries as ‘banality’, ‘vulgarity’ and ‘triviality’, but these are not precise equivalents. In contrast to banality, vulgarity and triviality, *poshlost* does not catch the eye. It is, as it were, covered with a protective layer, a kind of disguise or mask, which makes it difficult to see it for what it is: ‘Poshlust […] is especially vigorous and vicious when the sham is *not* obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest level of art, thought or emotion.’[[12]](#footnote-12) Poshlost is what unjustly presents itself as important, beautiful, intelligent or attractive. The genuine and unaffected is never poshlost.

In *Nikolai Gogol*, Nabokov recounts, as an example of *poshlost* or philistinism, an anecdote told by Gogol. Once upon a time, a German man was chasing a girl.[[13]](#footnote-13) Every evening, the girl would sit on her balcony near the lake knitting a stocking and enjoying the view. The German had tried multiple times to seduce her, but without success. And then he got an idea. ‘Every evening he would take off his clothes, plunge into the lake and, as he swam there, right under the eyes of his beloved, he would keep embracing a couple of swans which had been specially prepared for him for that purpose.’[[14]](#footnote-14) Nabokov quotes Gogol’s comment: ‘I do not quite know what those swans were supposed to symbolize […] Perhaps he fancied that there was something poetically antique and mythological in such frolics; but whatever notion he had, the result proved favourable to his intentions: the lady’s heart was conquered just as he thought it would be, and soon they were happily married.’[[15]](#footnote-15) This, writes Nabokov, is philistinism in its purest form. What irritates is not just the deed, but also its success. The philistine is often a winner.

Philistinism is more than a bunch of commonplace interests and conventional ideals. It manifests itself specifically in language: corny phrases, clichés and banalities of all kinds. The philistinism of an expression lies not in its being false. Philistinism is not about true or false, but about meaningful and meaningless. What the philistine says is often irrelevant. Her expressions excel in hollowness and false profoundness, they suffer from a lack of individuality. Nabokov provides examples of such expressions. Philistine book reviewers describe books as ‘stirring, profound and beautiful’, ‘elevated and powerful’. ‘The work of a master psychologist who can skilfully probe the very inner recesses of men’s souls.’ ‘You lose yourself in it completely.’ ‘When the last page is turned you come back to the world of everyday a little thoughtful, as after a great experience.’[[16]](#footnote-16) The philistine generously uses big words such as ‘beauty’, ‘love’, ‘nature’ and ‘truth’. He has nothing but these trivial, ‘faded words’ and ideas, ‘of which he entirely consists’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Nabokov does not deny that we all speak in clichés and big words from time to time. They are useful and often socially desirable. We have to be careful, however, not to be absorbed entirely by the automatic exchange of platitudes. Then we lose our individuality and become like robots. Precisely the lack of individuality is a distinctive mark of the philistine.

The philistine’s lack of individuality comes out clearly in her conformism. She is torn between two conformist desires. On the one hand, she wants to do what everyone does, buy what everyone buys and admire what everyone admires. On the other hand, she also wants to belong to an exclusive group, and this ‘wanting to belong’ is also a form of conformism. She enrols in an expensive club and finds pleasure in the thought that she is sitting next to a duchess: ‘Darling, I’ve actually talked to a duchess!’[[18]](#footnote-18) She is obsessed by wealth, standing and good reputation. In order to be appreciated by prestigious people, she starts by taking up their habits. She lets herself be absorbed by their rituals. The ritual suppresses the individual and incorporates it completely.

Because of his love for the useful and the material, the philistine is an easy victim of commercials and advertisements. Nabokov describes an ordinary advertisement.[[19]](#footnote-19) A family has bought a radio or a television. Even more illustrative is a radio disguised as a book shelve: ‘Today, of course, a philistine might dream of glass and steel, videos or radios disguised as book shelves and dumb pieces of furniture.’[[20]](#footnote-20) The mother claps in her hands, while the children admiringly range around the device. In the background, grandmother nods approvingly. Father smiles triumphantly with his hands in his pockets. The children have at least twenty two freckles and miss a couple of front teeth. Why is this *poshlost*? Not because the qualities of one or another product are exaggerated or invented, but because of the suggestion that the buyer will become better and happier due to the qualities of a thing. The thing makes the human being and not the other way round. Thanks to the thing, the buyer becomes part of an order prescribed by commercials. The philistine disappears in collective happiness.

An example of a philistine in Nabokov’s work is the character of Judith Clyde in *Pnin*.[[21]](#footnote-21) She is the president of a women’s club that organizes lectures. Her introduction to professor Pnin’s lecture is full of commonplace expressions such as ‘I am proud to say’, ‘he hardly needs any introduction’ (while nobody is likely to know him) and ‘I will not take up your precious time any longer’ (while most of the women in the club probably have all the time in the world).[[22]](#footnote-22) Clyde’s emphasis is on the collective, on the ‘clubbability’ typical of philistines.[[23]](#footnote-23) She constantly uses words like ‘us’ and ‘all’: ‘as you *all* remember’, ‘this is *our* Friday night’, ‘we *all* enjoyed’, ‘we *all* know’, … (my italics).[[24]](#footnote-24) This may all sound innocent to the ears of contemporary congress tourists, but it should be borne in mind that, to an individualist like Nabokov, who vehemently refused throughout his life to belong to any group whatsoever, the group think propagated here was nothing less than an abomination. Judith’s words are not meant to convey a thought or to generate meaning. Her language functions as it were detached from her, on autopilot she spouts one empty phrase after another. She refers, for instance, to the lecture of last week as follows: ‘Last time, as you all remember, we all enjoyed hearing what Professor Moore had to say about agriculture in China.’[[25]](#footnote-25) The word ‘enjoyed’ is misplaced when it comes to Chinese agriculture in the 1950s.

Judith’s attitude reminds one of Norpois, a character from Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* who extols books about the sense of the infinite on the western shore of Lake Victoria Nyanza and the repeating rifle in the Bulgarian army. Just like Norpois, Judith fails to distinguish the meaningful from the meaningless. In her short introduction, she characterizes Pnin as follows: ‘Incidentally, I am told his father was Dostoyevsky’s family doctor, and he has travelled quite a bit on both sides of the Iron Curtain.’[[26]](#footnote-26) It is rather degrading to introduce a lecturer, without any substantive motivation, by referring to his father. Moreover, Pnin’s father was not Dostoevsky’s family doctor at all. A few pages earlier, we read: ‘His father, Dr. Pavel Pnin, an eye specialist of considerable repute, had once had the honour of treating Leo Tolstoy for a case of conjunctivitis.’[[27]](#footnote-27) Pnin’s father treated Tolstoy only once, but Judith makes him into a family doctor, just because that sounds good in her club. And Tolstoy is not Dostoevsky, certainly not for Nabokov, who did not like Dostoevsky at all and admired Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina.* For Judith, however, the difference between Dostoevsky and Tolstoy is not what matters. After all, they are both famous writers. She apparently also finds it important that Pnin has travelled a lot, while traveling is not really an achievement. Moreover, Pnin is an emigrant who fled the communists in Russia. His travels were not entirely voluntary, and it is painful for someone to be reminded of a flight in such terms.

Another example of a philistine in Nabokov’s work is that of Paduk, the toad-like, abject dictator and president of the Party of the Average Man in the dystopian novel *Bend Sinister.* In this novel, Nabokov shows, with an obvious reference to the Soviet regime, how dangerous philistinism can be. Those who have been absorbed by mediocrity, those who have lost all individuality and have become hard and thing-like, petrified and fossilized like stones, will be inclined to see and treat others as if they were things, too. Thus, according to Nabokov, ‘to apply the deadly label of *poshlism* to something is not only an aesthetic judgment but also a moral indictment’.[[28]](#footnote-28)

1. **Sartre on Philistinism**

Nabokov’s description of philistinism is similar to that of Sartre. In *The Family Idiot,* a book about Flaubert that is often read as an indirect autobiography of Sartre, Sartre devotes a subchapter to ‘Gustave’s “Stupidity”’.[[29]](#footnote-29) He starts with the observation that nineteenth-century intellectuals, including Flaubert, ‘were in agreement on one point: to be *bourgeois* was to be a philistine’.[[30]](#footnote-30) We saw earlier that Nabokov also identifies the *bourgeois* (as a state of mind, not a state of pocket) with the philistine. In Nabokov’s lectures on *Madame Bovary*, a book Nabokov appreciated highly, we read: ‘Unless it simply means “townsman”, as it often does in French, the term “*bourgeois*” as used by Flaubert means “philistine”, people preoccupied with the material side of life and believing only in conventional values.’[[31]](#footnote-31)

In his discussion of Flaubert’s stupidity, Sartre distinguishes between

[…] two contradictory kinds of stupidity, one of which is the fundamental substance and the other the acid eating it away. Between the two, the struggle is continual and always a stalemate. One thing is certain: under one or the other of these aspects, stupidity always triumphs. This is deliberately suggested by the hideous spectacle of the abbé Bournisien and Monsieur Homais, overcome by the same sleepiness and snoring at each other, at the bedside of a dead woman they neither could cure nor save from hell.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Bournisien represents the first kind of stupidity, the ‘fundamental substance’, and Homais the second, ‘the acid eating it away’. The abbot and the pseudo-scientist, both characters in *Madame Bovary*, appear to be contradictory, but Sartre unites them in their philistinism. That is what Nabokov also does, for he quotes exactly the same passage.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The first kind of stupidity discussed by Sartre is ‘stupidity as substance’. It has two faces: ceremony and language. From a very early age, Flaubert realizes that there is something stupid about the ceremonies and rituals that go together with, for example, New Year’s Day. The whole thing has something hypocritical: people who do not like each other wish each other well and exchange presents. Those who want to belong have to participate. A collective attitude uses and absorbs the individuals. ‘It’ happens. ‘The ballet is staged for its own sake, and no longer ruled by anyone; on the contrary, it is itself thought of as the rule. This is a complete inversion of the classic relationship, *mens agitat molem*: here it is matter that activates the spirit.’[[34]](#footnote-34) This is precisely what irritated Nabokov in commercials. The rituals force themselves upon individuals and compel them to act mechanically. ‘The mechanical flattens the living, generality suppresses the originality of singular experience. […] This is the impersonal reign of the “One”: I pay a visit to my uncle because *one* pays visits to uncles on New Year’s Day.’[[35]](#footnote-35) For Sartre, as for Nabokov, philistine stupidity is the result of a process in which people become thing- or substance-like. A typical representative of stupidity as substance is Bournisien. In him, the principles of Catholicism have ‘taken on the weight and mass of lead’.[[36]](#footnote-36) They have taken control over him, he has become the incarnation of his principles. And when people become thing-like, it becomes difficult to distinguish people from things. Both things and people can be stupid. Charles Bovary’s cap, for example, ‘bespeaks the stupidity of its owner to such a degree that truly Charles himself is transformed into a cap’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Charles’s thing-like stupidity is confirmed by Nabokov, who describes him as a philistine without charm, without brains and without culture, full of conventional ideas and habits.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Stupidity as substance shows itself not only in ceremonies, but also in language. Sometimes people speak in sentences that are ‘so mechanically rigid as to exclude any living relation to situation, to truth, or quite simply to preceding sentences’.[[39]](#footnote-39) Words and sentences of a purely material nature, coming from somewhere outside, seem to use the individual, to nestle themselves in it and come out again when the occasion arises, without the individual being actively involved in the process. They are slogans and formulas, best wishes and sunny greetings. In Flaubert’s satirical *Dictionary of Received Ideas,* we read under ‘gift’ the following formula: ‘The gift is nothing, it’s the thought behind it.’[[40]](#footnote-40) For Flaubert, Sartre writes, language is not so much a box of tools or instruments that can be used to generate meaning or to refer to something in the world, but an endless commonplace that occupies persons. ‘On this level, Flaubert does not believe that *people speak – people are spoken.*’[[41]](#footnote-41)Prefabricated expressions entrap our thinking and dissolve it into a collection of commonplaces. As we have seen, the commonplace, both in thought and in language, was also characteristic of Judith Clyde’s lecture in Nabokov’s *Pnin.*

The mechanical and material aspect of philistinism comes out clearly in Sartre’s famous description, in *Being and Nothingness*, of a ‘*garcon de café*’*.* The young waiter, in his craving to be a real waiter, does his utmost to make his acting seem like a series of movements that flow mechanically from one to the next. As in Nabokov’s *poshlost*, everything turns around similarity and imitation: the waiter tries to imitate ‘the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton’.[[42]](#footnote-42) The role makes the man. Grocers, for example, do something similar: they make an effort to convince their clientele that they are *nothing but* a grocer. ‘A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer.’[[43]](#footnote-43) Both the waiter and the grocer contribute to a process in which a human being is being imprisoned in what he is, ‘as if we lived in perpetual fear that he might escape from it, that he might break away and suddenly elude his condition’.[[44]](#footnote-44) Just like Nabokov, Sartre understands that those who become automata, things, will be inclined to treat others as fellow things. About a young woman, a paragon of the bourgeois as a state of mind, Sartre writes: ‘The man who is speaking to her appears to her sincere and respectful as the table is round or square, as the wall colouring is blue or grey.’[[45]](#footnote-45) And just like Nabokov’s, Sartre’s philistine is a winner. He quotes from a letter by Flaubert: ‘Stupidity is something unshakable ; nothing can attack it without being broken. It has the quality of granite, hard and resistant.’[[46]](#footnote-46) In his letter, Flaubert tells a story about a certain Thompson, who wrote his name in big letters on a column in Pompeii, so that every visitor can see it. The pillar becomes an incarnation of Thompson, who has immortalized himself and his philistinism.

Isn’t it very clever to force future travellers to think of you and remember you? All fools are more or less Thompsons from Sunderland. How many times in life do we not encounter them in the most beautiful places, at the purest moments? And then, they always get the better of us; there are so many of them, they return so often, they are in such good health![[47]](#footnote-47)

The German got his girl, Thompson his fame, both are winners.

In Flaubert’s time, the representatives of stupidity as substance were aristocrats and clergymen. They defended the traditional values of the *ancien regime*. Their opponents were often inspired by Voltaire and the Enlightenment. They tried to combat the reactionary stupidity of aristocratic ideologies. Idealistic illusions and spiritualism need to be mercilessly unmasked in favour of rationalism and materialism. God and the supernatural have to make place for the new science with its critical and analytical approach. The old thinking, with all its speculative theory, its poetic exaltation, its catholic ceremonies and its superstition, has to be eradicated once and for all. But, according to Sartre, this liberalism, trying to systematically destruct received ideas, turns into a kind of stupidity itself: ‘stupidity as negativity’. Its pre-eminent representative is Homais, *Madame Bovary*’s pharmacist.

That Homais represents a kind of stupidity is clear for Nabokov, too: ‘The key to Flaubert’s term is the philistinism of his Monsieur Homais’.[[48]](#footnote-48) His thoughts are borrowed from pamphlets, his culture from newspapers and magazines. He has a horrible literary taste. He sacrifices his dignity for a decoration. Like many philistines, he is active in community life, and ‘the philistine in violent action is always more dangerous than the philistine who quietly sits before his television set’.[[49]](#footnote-49) Nabokov emphasizes that Homais is successful.[[50]](#footnote-50) So does Sartre: ‘In this lugubrious novel, which ends in wreckage, Homais alone is triumphant’.[[51]](#footnote-51) And Homais is unmistakably intelligent,[[52]](#footnote-52) which illustrates that philistine stupidity has nothing to do with a lack of intelligence.

Homais fulminates against the dogmas and the ignorance of priests. He is convinced of the superiority of science to faith. What Flaubert holds against him, according to Sartre, is not that he uses science to combat prejudices, but that he seems to have an unconditional and unquestioning faith in science and, thereby, in human reason. The absolute has not been removed, it has moved from heaven to the human brain. Flaubert ‘criticizes Homais for taking delight in crushing humanity’s greatest concerns under the accumulation of precise and cutting little truths’.[[53]](#footnote-53) He is a virulent atheist who equates faith to fanaticism. He prattles incessantly about the most uninteresting subjects, the weather for example, which makes one think about the lecture on Chinese agriculture in *Pnin* and Norpois’s book about the repeating rifle. What he says is often true, but it is irrelevant. Because it is true, however, it seems invincible. Homais’s little truths testify of a ‘shortsighted materialism’.[[54]](#footnote-54) He keeps on mechanically repeating the same formulae. Ultimately, he becomes nothing but emptiness and negativity. He is not a substance, he is nothing.

**Wittgenstein on Philistinism**

Although Wittgenstein rarely writes explicitly on stupidity and philistinism (but see section 5), many remarks of his allow us to construct a Wittgensteinian view on the subject. Such a view is remarkably similar to the Nabokovian and Sartrian views set out in the previous sections.

(1) First of all, Wittgenstein is notorious for his fierce opposition to the ‘stock ideas and conventional ideals of his group or time’. One could argue that every original thinker is. After all, who would want to be a spokesman of stock ideas and conventional ideas? Still, there are degrees of opposition. For Sartre, taking up a university post or accepting a Nobel Prize was already to allow oneself to be institutionalized to an unacceptable degree. Nabokov detested the institutionalization of herd instinct in Soviet communism, was reluctant to admit the existence of something like social classes, refused to join ‘any extracurricular groups, unions, associations, or societies’, and detested all kinds of generalizations and groups, ‘anything but the particular and independent’.[[55]](#footnote-55) As soon as he had enough money (thanks to the success of *Lolita*), he left the university. Wittgenstein constantly struggled with the idea to give up his university post in Cambridge and eventually did so. He dismissed philosophers’ ‘craving for generality’[[56]](#footnote-56) and emphasized that ‘the philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That makes him into a philosopher.’[[57]](#footnote-57) He almost apologized for connections between his ideas and those of others.[[58]](#footnote-58) He did not often go to conferences or meetings, and when he did, it was often reluctantly. Once he went to a conference in a hostel, and a conference participant, assuming that Wittgenstein was a student on vacation (because Wittgenstein used to dress rather unconventionally), said to him: ‘I’m afraid there is a gathering of philosophers going on in here.’ To which Wittgenstein replied: ‘I too.’[[59]](#footnote-59)

(2) Nabokov and Sartre both point at the thing-like impression people sometimes make. With their individuality, they seem to lose their humanity. Some human beings appear to be more human than others. Wittgenstein too often had problems to ‘recognize the *human being* in someone’,[[60]](#footnote-60) especially when he had to function in groups. His crew mates during the war were ‘unbelievably crude, stupid and malicious’ and he ‘could barely see them as human beings’.[[61]](#footnote-61) He wrote: ‘The people here are malicious and heartless. It is almost impossible to find a trace of humanity in them.’[[62]](#footnote-62) When he taught in a village in Austria, he described the people there as ‘not human *at all* but loathsome worms’.[[63]](#footnote-63) He moved to another village and told Russell that the people there ‘were not really people at all, but one-quarter animal and three-quarters human’.[[64]](#footnote-64) And about William James, he said: ‘That is what makes him a good philosopher; he was a real human being.’[[65]](#footnote-65) Not only did Wittgenstein notice the thing-like (or animal-like, or humanless) stupidity of people, he also saw that stupidity makes people indistinguishable from things, and was very sensitive to the possibility of things being stupid, especially when it came to ornamentation, furniture and houses.

(3) Wittgenstein was not particularly fond of his or any other group of people. He also felt utterly alien to the spirit of his time, as becomes clear from several remarks in *Culture and Value.* The spirit in which he writes is ‘different from that of the prevailing European and American civilization’, a spirit that is ‘alien & uncongenial to the author’.[[66]](#footnote-66) Wittgenstein repeatedly refers to what he calls the darkness or sickness of his time.[[67]](#footnote-67) He ‘contemplate[s] the current of European civilization without sympathy’.[[68]](#footnote-68) The main problem with his time, and the main cause of its darkness and sickness, is its preoccupation with science and progress.

It may be that science & industry, & their progress, are the most enduring thing in the world today. That any guess at a coming collapse of science & industry were for now, & for a *long* time to come, simply a dream, & that science & industry after & with infinite misery will unite the world, I mean integrate it into a single empire, in which to be sure peace is the last thing that will then find a home.

For science & industry do decide wars, or so it seems.[[69]](#footnote-69)

It should be noted, first, that this remark does not lend support to the idea that Wittgenstein was somehow against peace.[[70]](#footnote-70) On the contrary, his problem with science is that it will tend to make the world less peaceful. Secondly, Wittgenstein was not against science as such. He was not a reactionary who wanted to go back to pre-scientific times. What enraged him was that many scientists, instead of just doing proper science, pretend that science can solve ‘humanity’s greatest concerns’, as Homais, a representative of this scientistic spirit, this shortsighted materialism, also believes. For Wittgenstein, however, ‘there is no *great* essential problem in the scientific sense’.[[71]](#footnote-71) Scientists seem to think that, finally, we have found *the* method to solve our problems and that, at bottom, all problems are scientific problems. According to Wittgenstein, however, the problems of aesthetics, ethics, and philosophy, for instance, are not scientific problems at all, and they cannot be solved by applying scientific methods or by coming up with scientific facts.[[72]](#footnote-72) So science is both ‘enrichment & impoverishment’.[[73]](#footnote-73) The impoverishment lies in the fact that the scientific method ‘elbows all others aside’,[[74]](#footnote-74) as if everything non-scientific were pre-scientific. A good example of this scientistic spirit is Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. In his *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, Wittgenstein shows how a scientistic interpretation of mankind’s magical and religious views makes them look like errors and leads to egregious misunderstandings.

In short, what is wrong is not science, but the colonizing, imperialistic tendencies of the scientistic spirit that make it seem as if only science could teach us something worthwhile: ‘People nowadays think, scientists are there to instruct them, poets, musicians etc. to entertain them. *That the latter have something to teach them;* that never occurs to them.’[[75]](#footnote-75) Scientists tend to misunderstand themselves: ‘The less somebody knows & understands himself the less great he is, however great may be his talent. For this reason our scientists are not great. For this reason Freud, Spengler, Kraus, Einstein are not great.’[[76]](#footnote-76) That holds *a fortiori* for popular scientists who, rather than doing science and communicating scientific results, propagate the scientistic spirit by saying such misleading and confused things as that the floor on which we stand is not really solid.[[77]](#footnote-77) Wittgenstein’s favourite targets were Arthur Eddington, James Jeans and G. H. Hardy, whom he accused of sensationalism, journalism (for Wittgenstein, as for Nabokov, this is a very serious accusation!) and cheating.[[78]](#footnote-78) Wittgenstein’s opposition to the scientistic spirit is summarized in a letter to W. H. Watson: ‘Yes, I believe Einstein is just a bloody journalist [a reaction to the news that Einstein was occupying himself with disarmament] […] What you wrote about your boss [a physicist who wrote an article on physics and human interests] interested me very much, it’s such a typical thing to happen nowadays to otherwise good and kind people.’[[79]](#footnote-79)

(4) The scientistic spirit not only leads to misunderstandings both of others and of scientific practice itself, it also threatens to de-humanize, which is why there is a serious moral danger in allowing it to spread unrestrictedly. Its unquestioning commitment to objectivity and truth will reduce reality to, as Karsten Harries puts it in what I take to be a Wittgensteinian vein, ‘a collection of mute facts, raw material that lacks meaning until appropriated and put to use by human subjects. Science so understood knows nothing of incarnations of meaning in matter, knows nothing of freedom, knows therefore nothing of persons as persons.’[[80]](#footnote-80) A world pervaded by the scientific spirit is an impersonal world governed by the ‘it’ or ‘one’, and this thought clarifies why Wittgenstein says that ‘it is not absurd to believe that the scientific and technological age is the beginning of the end for humanity; […] that humanity, in seeking it [scientific knowledge], is falling into a trap.’[[81]](#footnote-81) It also helps to understand why Carnap ‘sometimes had the impression that the deliberately rational and unemotional attitude of the scientist and likewise any idea which had the flavour of ‘enlightenment’ were repugnant to Wittgenstein’.[[82]](#footnote-82)

(5) The linguistic aspect of Nabokovian and Sartrian philistinism is prominent in Wittgensteinian philistinism too. The distinction between sense and nonsense, meaningful and meaningless, occupied him throughout his philosophical career. What is not false is thereby not yet true, because it can fail to make sense. Many philosophers use words in such ways that they do not make sense, because these words are not actually used in these ways in the language in which they are at home, and it is the Wittgensteinian philosopher’s task to ‘bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’.[[83]](#footnote-83) Although Nabokov and Sartre were not interested specifically in philosophical word-use, their comments about big, faded, empty and hollow words and sentences applies here too. In uttering them, people often do not really *say* anything, their words do not have meaning because they do not *use* language.[[84]](#footnote-84) They do not speak, they are spoken.[[85]](#footnote-85) Here, the speaker is detached from her words, language has gone ‘on holiday’.[[86]](#footnote-86) It is, as it were, ‘idling’, not doing any work.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Like Nabokov and Sartre, Wittgenstein understood that certain words and sentences, because of the role they play in a culture or (intellectual) tradition, are more liable to suffer a loss of meaning than others. These ‘super-concepts’ are thought to express something higher, something big: ‘if the words “language”, “experience”, “world” have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words “table”, “lamp”, “door”’.[[88]](#footnote-88) Words like ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ do ‘not tolerate a metaphysical emphasis’,[[89]](#footnote-89) they easily take on what Sartre called ‘the weight and mass of lead’. They play the role that ‘beauty’, ‘love’ and ‘nature’ play in Nabokovian philistinism. Wittgenstein said about the word ‘beautiful’ that ‘it misleads and levels out the great difference between appreciating different matters; it is like calling all pictures green or all dishes by the name of the sauce spread over them’.[[90]](#footnote-90) As for Sartre’s mechanically produced conventional slogans and formulae, uttered automatically without any conscious involvement of a speaker, coming from outside and using the speaker merely as a medium, Stanley Cavell writes that ‘what directly falls under his [Wittgenstein’s] criticism are those unnoticed turns of mind, casts of phrase, which comprise what intellectual historians call “climates of opinion”, or “cultural style”’.[[91]](#footnote-91) Cavell provides some examples: ‘To be clear about our meaning we must define our terms’, ‘All rationally settleable questions are questions of language or questions of fact’, ‘Knowledge is increased only by reasoning or by collecting evidence’, ‘Taste is relative, and people might like, or get pleasure from anything’. These examples have a status similar to that of ‘it’s not the gift that counts, but the thought behind it’.

**Speaking for Oneself**

In the previous sections, I have brought together, under the heading of philistinism, (1) authors that are seldom brought together and (2) well-known aspects of Wittgenstein’s thought the connection between which often goes unnoticed. I have focused on similarities between three views on philistine stupidity, and in doing that I have ignored otherwise significant differences between these thinkers. Yet one important difference concerning philistinism deserves attention. The difference can be brought out by considering the question ‘Is it possible *not* to be a philistine, and if so, how?’

For Sartre, the triumph of stupidity is total, because he sees a necessary link between philistine stupidity and individuation. He describes the process of individuation in *The Transcendence of the Ego.* He starts from an empty and impersonal consciousness. The personal, the ego, gets formed when that consciousness, as it were, sticks to certain things, when an empty consciousness gets ‘filled’ with being. Out of an undirected, ‘wild’ consciousness develops an interest for certain things. These things (books, for example) or roles (like the role of a waiter or grocer) make people into what they are, they direct and bind consciousness, establish boundaries within which one acts. The individual is only an individual because he is *something*: a philosopher, a waiter, a bourgeois. Everything we call personal is the result of a process in which a consciousness is filled with substance. Therefore, every individual is stupid to a certain extent, and we are always ‘on the defensive’.[[92]](#footnote-92) Sartre situates stupidity in every individual and thus also in himself. Everybody is, to a certain extent, stupid, and that is what makes stupidity, for Sartre and for Flaubert, inescapable . The threat of de-humanization is part of what it is to be human. Every individual is marked, to a certain extent, by a lack of individuality.

While Sartre did not exonerate himself from philistinism, Nabokov certainly did. He did not think of looking for traces of philistinism in himself. In ‘The Art of Literature and Commonsense’, Nabokov presents us with an individual (not accidentally a good writer) in which not a grain of stupidity can be found.[[93]](#footnote-93) He places the dangerous philistinism of common sense over and against the genius, whom he advises ‘the much abused ivory tower’ ‘as a fixed address’.[[94]](#footnote-94) With regard to stupidity, Nabokov has exactly what Sartre ascribes to all writers, except to Flaubert, who have written about the topic: ‘an agreeable feeling of superiority […] They were not of the same species as the subhumanity they stigmatized.’[[95]](#footnote-95) That is why, while both Nabokov and Sartre can see the de-humanizing danger in philistinism, only Nabokov can really see the label as a moral indictment: some people are to blame, others are not. If one cannot help being a philistine, as on Sartre’s view, one cannot be responsible for it.

Wittgenstein steers an interesting middle course between Sartre and Nabokov. Both the Nabokovian and the Sartrian views have something static or fatalistic. While for Sartre we are all philistines and, fundamentally, there is nothing to do about it (although we may be able to change the degree to which we are philistines), so no fight to be won, Nabokov’s geniuses have nothing (no philistine desires or inclinations) to fight against. Wittgenstein, on the contrary, sees philistinism as a tendency we all have to fight against. His answer is: yes, it is possible not to be a philistine, at least at some moments and for some people. Not to be a philistine is *to be human and to speak for oneself*. Both being human and the ability to speak for oneself are not just gifts, but *achievements*, and they are *hard* to achieve. Let me explain that.

In a conversation with members of the Vienna Circle recorded by Friedrich Waismann, Wittgenstein says: ‘At the end of my lecture on ethics, I spoke in the first person. I believe that is quite essential. Here nothing more can be established, I can only appear as a person speaking for oneself.’[[96]](#footnote-96) In ethics, according to Wittgenstein, one has to speak for oneself.[[97]](#footnote-97) That is, first of all, because the impersonal investigations of scientists will yield factual knowledge, but the world of facts is entirely different from the world of value.[[98]](#footnote-98) Secondly, the moral demand to speak for oneself is more than a demand not to talk facts in ethics. It is a demand to be *behind* one’s words, to be somehow *in* them or *involved* in them, to *say* something instead of producing formulae. As for Nabokov, this demand is both aesthetical and ethical for Wittgenstein, and he saw the two as closely interconnected.[[99]](#footnote-99) One could now ask why speaking for oneself is morally so important. From an aesthetical perspective, it is easy to understand that a writer, for example, should ideally have ‘her own voice’. But why is that an *ethical* demand? For Wittgenstein, the answer is connected to his normative notion of humanity. In a sense, a scientific sense one could say, every human being is (trivially) human, just like every speaker speaks for himself and every person has her own voice. In another, normative sense, humanity and the ability to speak for oneself have to be achieved and fought for. With the possibility to acquire them comes also the threat of losing them when one has them. That is why Wittgenstein reminds his readers and his friends of the *value* of ‘the human gaze’ that ‘has the power of making things precious’,[[100]](#footnote-100) and why it makes sense to *encourage* people to ‘be human’[[101]](#footnote-101) and to *warn* them against becoming inhuman.[[102]](#footnote-102) Cavell is right, then, to see Wittgenstein’s philosophy (and ordinary language philosophy as a whole) ‘not as an effort to reinstate vulgar beliefs, or common sense, to a pre-scientific position of eminence, but to reclaim the human self from its denial and neglect by modern philosophy’.[[103]](#footnote-103) Wittgenstein famously asked himself in an early letter to Russell: ‘How can I be a logician before I’m a human being!’[[104]](#footnote-104)

It is clear enough that one can see the demand to become (more) human as an ethical demand. But how exactly is ‘becoming more human’ connected to ‘speaking for oneself’ or ‘having one’s own voice’? To be human, for Wittgenstein, is to be a language-user. But when language idles, as we have seen, when the philistine just utters her nonsensical sounds, no real use is made of language. One could argue here that Wittgenstein’s critique of nonsensical language-use, a disease to be cured by philosophical therapies,[[105]](#footnote-105) is intra-philosophical, a critique of philosophical word-use that has no application outside philosophy. That, however, is not how Wittgenstein saw it. In a letter to Normal Malcolm, he writes:

Whenever I thought of you I couldn’t help thinking of a particular incident which seemed to me very important […] you made a remark about ‘national character’ that shocked me by its primitiveness. I then thought: what is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic etc., and if it does not impr[ove] your thinking about the important questions of everyday life, if it does not make you more conscientious than any … journalist in the use of the *dangerous* phrases such people use for their own ends. You see, I know that it’s difficult to think *well* about ‘certainty’, ‘probability’, ‘perception’, etc. But it is, if possible, still more difficult to think, or *try* to think, really honestly about your life and other people’s lives. And the trouble is that thinking about these things is *not thrilling,* but often downright nasty. And when it’s nasty then it’s *most* important. […]

But anyway, if we live to see each other again let’s not shirk digging. You can’t think decently if you don’t want to hurt yourself. I know all about it because I am a shirker.[[106]](#footnote-106)

According to Wittgenstein, Malcolm unthinkingly uttered by the stock expression ‘national character’. This is dangerous, not conscientious, and it testifies of dishonest thinking, which shows that Wittgenstein thought about Malcolm’s mistake as a *moral* mistake.

Wittgenstein never thought himself free of similar moral mistakes. His work is a constant battle against temptations to talk nonsense, and his life is pervaded by feelings of guilt for not being able to live up to his own moral ideals (‘I am a shirker’). Unlike Nabokov and like Sartre, he did not imagine himself free of the faults he saw around him,[[107]](#footnote-107) and he believed that nothing could be more human than the inclination to reject the human:[[108]](#footnote-108) ‘Language sets everyone the same traps.’[[109]](#footnote-109) Unlike Sartre, though, he emphasizes that however nasty it is to think honestly and decently (that is, like a real human being such as William James), that the disease *can* be cured, even if only temporarily or with regard to some specific problems, and that one should not give up trying to cure it. Time and time again, he mentions the importance of *courage*, both in and outside philosophy. ‘Courage, not cleverness; not even inspiration, is the grain of mustard that grows up to be a great tree. […] One might say: ‘Genius is *courage in one’s talent*.’’[[110]](#footnote-110) Malcolm remembers that

Wittgenstein liked to draw an analogy between philosophical thinking and swimming: just as one’s body has a natural tendency towards the surface and one has to make an *exertion* to get to the *bottom* – so it is with thinking. In talking about human greatness, he once remarked that he thought that the measure of a man’s greatness would be in terms of what his work *cost* him. There is no doubt that Wittgenstein’s philosophical labours cost him a great deal.[[111]](#footnote-111)

What is distinctive, then, about Wittgensteinian philistinism is that it recognizes the *struggle*, in one and the same person, between humanizing and philistine tendencies, while Sartre, I would say, emphasizes the *presence* of these tendencies rather than the struggle between them. Philistine inclinations can at least temporarily be overcome, but that requires an exceptional amount of courage to ‘go the bloody rough way’.[[112]](#footnote-112) Those who go that way (and there is no list of steps to take here, no practical handbook with concrete tips) might eventually be able to speak for themselves, to have their own voice, to be the author of their own words, to make language work, to be human. That, according to Wittgenstein, is how not to be a philistine.

**Wittgenstein’s Moral Response**

The previous sections put us in a position to understand Wittgenstein’s rebuke of Russell. What Wittgenstein did not like about Russell’s ‘World Organization for Peace and Freedom’ was its philistine flavour. That may seem to be a bold statement, for we have not seen Wittgenstein using the word ‘philistine’, although we suggested that a Wittgensteinian view on philistinism could be constructed. Consider now the following remark:

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.[[113]](#footnote-113)

Wittgenstein explicitly talks about philistines here (the emphasis is not mine), and many things dealt with in previous sections (the public, the soapy water science) are clearly connected to it. Like the remark about the World Organization, this one too can be read as a remark pro destruction,[[114]](#footnote-114) thus supporting the view that, in moral matters, Wittgenstein was a ‘loose cannon’.[[115]](#footnote-115) It must be noticed, however, that in the last sentence of the remark Wittgenstein explicitly expresses reservations about the question of whether the atom bomb is to be welcomed, and we have seen before that he was longing for a world in which peace would find a home. Wittgenstein is not pro atom bombs, but against the philistines ‘making an outcry’. Being against the atom bomb is not something that supports too heavy an emphasis, like being for peace and freedom, or being for love or beauty or truth, for nobody could reasonably hold the opposite position. It is moralistic to tell people that you are for or against these things. It is like Miss World saying that her greatest wish is to help the poor little children.

When Nabokov’s *Lolita* appeared, people found the book to be immoral because it contained no explicit condemnation of pedophilia. In the afterword, Nabokov wrote that the book ‘has no moral in tow’,[[116]](#footnote-116) but in a letter to Edmund Wilson he asked him to ‘please mark that it is a highly moral affair’.[[117]](#footnote-117) Only a philistine would cry out that she is against pedophilia. Nabokov understands that he cannot make too bold and explicit moral judgments in his book, that it will be more powerful if he just shows things and describes without passing explicit value judgments. This reminds one of Wittgenstein who, in the *Tractatus*, sees ethics as something to be silent about, something that can at most be shown but not said, and writes in a famous letter to Ludwig von Ficker that, nevertheless, the main point of his book is ethical.[[118]](#footnote-118) In a letter to Malcolm, Wittgenstein underlines his uneasiness with philistine moralizing in relation to Tolstoy’s work:

[…] I once tried to read ‘Resurrection’ but couldn’t. You see, when Tolstoy just tells a story he impresses me infinitely more than when he addresses the reader. When he turns his back to the reader then he seems to me *most* impressive. Perhaps one day we can talk about this. It seems to me his philosophy is most true when it’s *latent* in the story.[[119]](#footnote-119)

Wittgenstein’s problem with the later Tolstoy can be described as one of moral overacting: there is something presumptuous and complacent, thus something immoral about presenting oneself as a moral leader.[[120]](#footnote-120)

What is wrong with Russell’s remark is not the mere occurrence of the words ‘peace’ and ‘freedom’. These words *can* be meaningfully used, if only some context were provided: peace where, for whom, in what conflict, etc.? Russell’s words make the impression of someone coming towards you on the street, out of the blue, making the V-sign and saying ‘peace man’. The word ‘peace’, uttered as Russell does, is so big a word, so inflated with air that it becomes nothing but air. The combination ‘peace and freedom’ makes things even worse, for these are two different things, and ‘freedom’, as such, may be even more hollow a word than ‘peace’ is. Just like the difference between Dostoevsky and Tolstoy did not matter much for Judith Clyde, the difference between peace and freedom does not seem to matter for Russell. Instead of making things clearer and more meaningful, the addition of ‘and freedom’ makes the fog thicker and leaves us entirely in the lurch about what this organization wants to do. That it is a ‘World Organization’ is, as it were, the straw that breaks the camel’s back. We are left with philistine emptiness that, as Nabokov formulates it, presents itself as important and intelligent. Philosophers could think here, I suppose, of event titles such as ‘Philosophy: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow’ or ‘International Workshop on Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences and Related Topics’.

Wittgenstein’s attitude towards Russell, to be sure, was not the same as his attitude toward his crew mates in the war or the people in Austria. Russell, to say the least, was a highly intelligent man. But, as we have seen, philistinism presupposes civilization, and intelligence and philistinism do not exclude each other. The intelligence we speak of is what Wittgenstein would call ‘cleverness’. Clever thoughts can be dangerous, they are not necessarily good or decent thoughts.[[121]](#footnote-121) Wittgenstein did not think that Russell never had any good thoughts or that he was incapable of having them. His attitude towards Russell, in so far as it allows for a general characterization, was ambivalent. He once suggested that Russell’s books should be bound in two colors, ‘those dealing with mathematical logic in red – and all students of philosophy should read them; those dealing with ethics and politics in blue – and no one should be allowed to read them’.[[122]](#footnote-122) Precisely because Russell was intelligent and Wittgenstein knew that he was capable of having good and decent thoughts, it made sense for Wittgenstein to be indignant about Russell’s words and to rebuke him. Although Russell certainly was one of those who made ‘speeches against the production of the bomb’, and in that respect allied to the dregs of the intelligentsia, he alternated what Wittgenstein saw as philosophical journalism and sensationalism with serious work (although the balance shifted as he grew older), which made him stand out favourably in Wittgenstein’s eyes against other popularizers of philosophy such as Cyril Joad, whom Wittgenstein called a ‘slum landlord’.[[123]](#footnote-123)

In short, Wittgenstein felt that Russell was capable of speaking for himself and that he was too good to be the spokesman of shadowy ideas. He knew that Russell was no exception to Nabokov’s and Sartre’s observation that philistinism is likely to triumph, that Russell’s philistine thoughts would make (or had already made) him more popular than his serious ones, and that that made it even more difficult for Russell to resist them. His rebuke can be translated as ‘Come on, Russell, don’t let yourself be tempted. Don’t be vain, don’t be a philistine. You are responsible for what you’re saying, don’t hide behind big words. Make an effort to say something real. Be decent.’ I do not want to suggest that, according to Wittgenstein, Russell was not *really* against war and slavery, or that Russell would not *do* everything he could to promote peace and freedom in concrete cases. That was not Wittgenstein’s problem. He did not think that Russell was insincere, but rather that he had failed to express a real or clear belief and that, therefore, the categories of ‘sincere’ and ‘insincere’ were inapplicable. He had not made enough effort to turn, as Sabina Lovibond puts it, ‘interpersonally available thought content’ into ‘content to which the utterer is related as author’.[[124]](#footnote-124) The statement has not been fully appropriated by the speaker. Russell relates to his words as an imitator rather than as an author,[[125]](#footnote-125) serving as a mouthpiece for them rather than being their originator. Wittgenstein’s problem was that Russell had uttered empty words (the value of which Russell considered, in Nabokov’s words, to belong to the very highest level of thought), that he had failed to say something meaningful. That problem, I submit, is central in Nabokov’s and Sartre’s accounts of philistinism and lies at the heart of Wittgenstein’s life and work. It is undoubtedly a moral problem. If we see a concern with *that* problem as the core of Wittgenstein’s response to Russell, then, however exaggerated we may think the response to be, I hope to have made it plausible that it was neither amoral nor immoral.

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1. Ray Monk, *The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1991), 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hans-Johann Glock, ‘Wittgenstein and Reason’ in James Klagge (ed.), *Wittgenstein. Biography & Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 195-220 (205-6). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Duncan Richter, ‘Whose Ethics? Which Wittgenstein?’, *Philosophical Papers* **31** (2002), 323-42 (325). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Monk, *Duty of Genius*, 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a full account of these views (in Dutch), see Benjamin De Mesel, ‘Nabokov, Sartre en de Triomf van de Domheid’, *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* **76** (2014), 31-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books. Preliminary Studies for the ‘Philosophical Investigations’* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 182. On the history of the term ‘philistinism’, see E. V. K. Brill, ‘The Philistine Concept in German Literature’, *European Studies Review* **7** (1977), 77-93 and Ole Nyegaard, ‘Poshlust and High Art. A Reading of Nabokov’s Aesthetics’, *Orbis Litterarum* **59** (2004), 341-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Vladimir Nabokov, ‘Philistines and Philistinism’, in *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1981), 309-14 (309). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 309-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Some authors have pointed at differences between philistinism and *poshlost* (Nyegaard, ‘Poshlust and High Art’). For our purposes, they can be treated as synonyms. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. According to Nabokov, Germany is the land of poshlost. A similar view is defended in Brill, ‘The Philistine Concept’. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol,* 65-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 68-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Nabokov, ‘Philistines and Philistinism’, 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 312-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature,* 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Nyegaard, ‘Poshlust and High Art’, discusses the same example. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Nyegaard, ‘Poshlust and High Art’, 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Nabokov, *Pnin,* 26-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Nabokov, ‘Philistines and Philistinism’, 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot. Gustave Flaubert 1821-1857. Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 592-627. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 592. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Sartre, *The Family Idiot,* 593. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature,* 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Sartre, *The Family Idiot,* 595. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 596. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 597. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 597. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature,* 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Sartre, *The Family Idiot,* 598. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Gustave Flaubert, *The Dictionary of Received Ideas* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Sartre, *The Family Idiot,* 602. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Routledge, 2005), 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Sartre, *The Family Idiot,* 606. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 606. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature,* 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Sartre, *The Family Idiot,* 622. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., 622. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., 623. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 623. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Boyd, *The Russian Years,* 63, 88 and 4. See also Ibid., 84 and Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 82, 133, 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books,* 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), §455. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Monk, *Duty of Genius,* 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*  (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Monk, *Duty of Genius,* 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 212. See also ibid., 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., 478. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. For support of the claim that Wittgenstein was not against peace or pro destruction, see Wittgenstein’s letter to Malcolm in Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge. Letters and Documents 1911-1951* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. See Benjamin De Mesel, ‘On Wittgenstein’s Comparison of Philosophical Methods to Therapies’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid., 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid., 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Ibid., 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books,* 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. O. K. Bouwsma, *Wittgenstein. Conversations 1949-1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge,* 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Karsten Harries, ‘Philosophy in Search of Itself’, in C. P. Ragland and Sarah Heidt (eds.), *What is Philosophy?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 47-73 (67). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Rudolf Carnap, ‘Intellectual Autobiography’, in Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* (La Salle: Open Court, 1963), 1-84 (29). [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* §116. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid., §43. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. See, in this respect, James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Public and Private Occasions* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* §38. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Ibid., §132. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid., §97. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), §482. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Klagge and Nordmann, *Public and Private Occasions,* 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 175. Cavell offers an interpretation of Wittgenstein and, like any interpretation of Wittgenstein, some other interpreters will have problems with it. I do not want to present Cavell’s reading as the only possible one and this is not the place to defend it. I can only say that I agree with the parts I quote. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Sartre, *The Family Idiot,* 593. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Vladimir Nabokov, ‘The Art of Literature and Commonsense’, in *Lectures on Literature,* 371-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Nabokov, ‘The Art of Literature’, 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Sartre, *The Family Idiot,* 592-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Friedrich Waismann, ‘Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein’, *The Philosophical Review* **74** (1965), 12-16 (16). [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. For another discussion of this point, see Matthew Pianalto, ‘Speaking for Oneself. Wittgenstein on Ethics’, *Inquiry* **54** (2011), 252-276. The relation between Pianalto’s article and mine is complex and cannot be discussed here. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 2005), 6.421. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Ibid., 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge,* 416. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Cavell, *Claim of Reason,* 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge,* 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* §133. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge,* 370. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Cavell, *Claim of Reason,* 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Ibid., 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Ibid., 44. See also Ibid., 16, 42, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. A Memoir* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge,* 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* 55-6. For Wittgenstein on ‘*bourgeois*’, see Klagge and Nordmann, *Public and Private Occasions,* 129, 147 and 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. See, for example, Richter, ‘Whose Ethics?’, 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Hans-Johann Glock, ‘Wittgensteinian Anti-Anti-Realism’, *Ethical Perspectives* **22** (2015), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Boyd, *The American Years,* 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Monk, *Duty of Genius,* 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge,* 385. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Consider, in that respect, the Chinese millionaire who put on his business card that he is China’s ‘Moral Leader’, the ‘Most Well-Known and Beloved Chinese Role Model’ and the ‘Most Prominent Philantropist of China’. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/chinese-tycoon-chen-guangbiao-has-the-worlds-best-business-card-9048911.html> [accessed 01/06/15]. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge,* 326 and 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Maurice Drury, ‘Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein’, in Rush Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge,* 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2002), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Ibid., 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)