WITTGENSTEIN AND POLITICS: NOT RIGHT, LEFT OR CENTER

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Insofar as Wittgenstein had opinions about politics, he did not broadcast them, and secondhand reports of his responses to political events do not add up to much. There is next to nothing to be gleaned from the opinions of the company he kept and his reactions to major social upheavals were strikingly ambivalent.[[1]](#footnote-1) The picture that emerges from his private ruminations and the reminiscences of others is of someone exercised by social issues only insofar as they impinged on his own moral worth and the well-being of his friends and family. He was more concerned, some would say over concerned, with ethical and religious problems, and his desire to improve the world was practically nil. Indeed it is hard to resist the conclusion that his interests were personal rather than political and his life would have been little different had he not thought about politics at all.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Nor is there anything in Wittgenstein's philosophical writings remotely approaching an unambiguous expression of right-wing or left-wing sentiments. The words "politics" and "political" do not figure in his work and politicians are referred to only in passing.[[3]](#footnote-3) All that can reasonably be argued is that Wittgenstein's philosophy has indirect implications for how we should collectively live our lives, approach political problems or think about political theory. In this paper I proceed more or less as Wittgenstein recommends in the *Tractatus*; I critically examine claims that have been made regarding the significance of his writings for politics with an eye to showing they are textually dubious or otherwise misleading.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*1. Von Wright and forms of life*

*[I]t was [Wittgenstein's] philosophic conviction that the life of the human individual and therefore also all individual manifestations of culture are deeply entrenched in basic struc­tures of a social nature. The structures in question are what Wittgenstein calls* "Lebensformen"*, forms of life, and their em­bodiment in what he calls* "Sprachspiele"*, language-games; they are "das Hinzunehmende, Gegebene", that which we accept in all our judging and thinking (cf.* Philosophical Investigations*, p. 226;* On Certainty*, §559). This basis, to be sure, is not eternal and im­mutable. It is a product of human history and changes with history. It is something man made and he changes. But how this happens is, according to Wittgenstein, not to be accounted for by a theory, or foreseen. "Who knows the laws according to which society develops?" he asks, and adds, "I am quite sure they are a closed book even to the cleverest of men."* (Culture and Value*,* p. 60)[[5]](#footnote-5)

In this passage von Wright, who knew Wittgenstein well, suggests that the remarks of the *Investigations*, *On Certainty* and other works from the same period have important implications for our understanding of the human condition.[[6]](#footnote-6) Von Wright's key thought – that Wittgenstein is at pains to remind us of social aspects of our lives – is surely reasonable enough. Nobody can deny he stresses that we are trained to think in ways common to our community and assimilate the mores of ongoing social practices as we grow up. (Von Wright later speaks of "Wittgenstein's view of the entrenchment of the individual in social reality".) Moreover there is much to be said for von Wright's view that Wittgenstein believes our forms of life and language-games, though not "eternal and immutable", are beyond our control and understanding. It is not difficult to see why Wittgenstein is often held to have believed there is precious little we can do to improve our lot.

Still the passages von Wright cites about our being entrenched in social reality hardly establish that Wittgenstein thinks we are stuck with what we have. The passage from the *Investigations* – "What has to be accepted, the given, are – so one could say – *forms of life*" – is nebulous enough to be acceptable to thinkers on both sides of the political fence, and Wittgenstein would doubtless have bridled at the suggestion he was expressing a "philosophic conviction" (rather than stating a trivial fact). In the part of *Investigations* from which the sentence is drawn he is discussing activities that have to be "accepted", activities like calculatiny and judging color. And likewise for the passage from *On Certainty* von Wright refers to: "You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life". This is not to say we cannot improve "the language-game". Wittgenstein did not doubt he could change his own life, and there is no reason to think he would have regarded changing our lives collectively any differently.

At first sight the remark from *Culture and Value* seems more telling. If "the laws according to which society develops" are "a closed book even to the cleverest of men", it does not make much sense to try to work out them out with the object of helping things along. When considered in context, however, this remark turns out to have an altogether different thrust. Not only does Wittgenstein not rule out the possibility of a scientific account of the development of aspects of society, he only takes issue with what "[p]eople say". He asks what justifies their maintaining "If *he* hadn't done *that*, the evil would have been avoided", says what von Wright quotes him as saying, and concludes: "If you fight, you fight. If you hope, you hope. You can fight, hope and even believe without believing *scientifically*". One might just as well regard him as arguing that we should take a chance and pray for the best.

Actually von Wright's characterization of Wittgenstein's view of social change is reminiscent of nothing so much as Karl Marx's. There is not much to choose between speaking of human history as "something man made and *he* changes" and speaking of people as making their own history under circumstances not of their own making.[[7]](#footnote-7) Wittgenstein is not Marx but there are many passages where he sounds more like him than like a proponent of the *status quo*. It was, after all, Wittgenstein who said: "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 problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and life, not through a medicine invented by an individual".[[8]](#footnote-8) Opposition to philosophical conceptions of history that stress ideas to the exclusion of all else is not the preserve of thinkers of one political persuasion.

*2. O'Hear and the limits of reason*

*Wittgenstein himself, it must be admitted, does little to allay [the suspicion he is more a relativist than a conservative] when, for example, he discusses the physicists and the natives in* On Certainty *(OC, 608—612). It is not wrong, apparently, for us to be guided in our action by the propositions of physics, but we must realize the groundlessness of our doing so. Natives who consult oracles instead of physicists would be considered by us to be primitive, but we must remember that we are simply using our language-game as a base from which to combat theirs. Reason only goes so far, 'at the end of reasons comes persuasion'. Think, says Wittgenstein, of what happens when missionaries convert natives.[[9]](#footnote-9)*

Doubtless the passages in *On Certainty* O'Hear mentions sound like an endorsement of irrationalism.[[10]](#footnote-10) Wittgenstein seems to be saying people have no justification for their system of beliefs and change of belief is in the final analysis invariably a matter of will, force, propaganda or the like. His view appears to be that systems of belief are beyond rational confirmation or falsification (and hence subject only to replacement or outright repudiation). Since "at the end of reasons comes *persuasion*", the acceptability of a system of belief is is an external question, one to be decided on purely pragmatic grounds. Basic change in science is revolutionary in the sense often attributed to Thomas Kuhn; basic change in everyday life sooner or later involves an existential decision; and basic change in politics is fundamentally a matter of might making right.[[11]](#footnote-11) Whatever else Wittgenstein may be saying, he would seem to embrace some form of existentialism, anarchism or voluntarism (along the lines, perhaps, of V.I. Lenin in "What is to be done?").

Certainly Wittgenstein asks whether it is "wrong for [a people] to consult an oracle and be guided by it" (§609), avers that "there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings" (§610) and claims that "[w]here two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic" (§611). Yet his remarks are not a paean to irrationalism. Besides the fact that §§608-612 mainly consist of questions, the thrust of other passages in the general vicinity is very different. In §606, for instance, Wittgenstein says: "That to my mind someone else has been wrong is no ground for assuming I am wrong now. But isn't it a ground for assuming I *might* be wrong? It is *no* ground for any *unsureness* in my judgements, or my actions". And in §608, a section to which O'Hear refers, he asks: "Is it wrong for me to be guided in my action by the propositions of physics? Am I to say I have no good ground for doing so? Isn't it precisely this what we call a 'good ground'?". This is not to praise unmotivated thought and action, only to emphasize the point, already touched on, that forms of life are "given".

Wittgenstein never suggests that discussion is impotent and force preferable to reason. There is nothing in *On Certainty* that indicates he is more kindly disposed to irrationalism and voluntarism than thinkers, like Marx, who disdained them. In §§608-612 Wittgenstein is challenging the idea that reason can always be relied on and nothing else has to be accepted. All he is committed to is the anodyne proposition that argument has its limits and persuasion in some form or other may be unavoidable. The message to be extracted from his remarks is that pronouncements about what we should do in every case are at best empty, at worst irresponsible and counterproductive. One cannot assume that reason will always do the trick and the need for propaganda, coercion or something similarly "non-rational" cannot be ruled out in advance.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Nor is Wittgenstein plausibly regarded as having believed that science and society constitute successions of incommensurable practices in the manner that Kuhn is said to have taken them (and Paul Feyerabend often did take them). He had no interest in developing models of science and society and never suggests that paradigms, language-games, systems of belief, world-pictures, call them what you will, are self-contained and invulnerable to critical evaluation. His view is rather that change is piecemeal and deliberate. As he sees it, ordinary "fluid propositions" gradually become "hardened channels" (which belong to the "world-picture") and hardened channels gradually become fluid propositions.[[13]](#footnote-13) This is not existentialism, relativism or voluntarism. It is the commonsense realism of someone who thinks "[n]othing is so difficult as doing justice to the facts".[[14]](#footnote-14)

*3. Eagleton and metaphysical mystification*

*Where Wittgenstein's philosophy is reactionary is not in its referring of beliefs and discourses to social activity, but in its assumption that such referring constitutes a liberation from the metaphysical. 'When philosophers use a word — "knowledge", "being", "object", "I", "proposition", "name" — and try to grasp the* essence *of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? — What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use'. (*[Philosophical Investigations] *116)*

*And where, for Marxism and post-structuralism, could metaphysics be more at home than in the everyday? For Wittgenstein, metaphysical mystifications seem to arise for purely linguistic reasons — from 'a tendency to sublime the logic of language' (38), from 'the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (109)*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Eagleton is one among many who take Wittgenstein's philosophy to be "reactionary" since it privileges our everyday practices and portrays metaphysical obfuscation as arising "for purely linguistic reasons".[[16]](#footnote-16) For all its popularity, however, this line of criticism falls badly short of the mark. Wittgenstein does not deny that metaphysics is "at home ... in the everyday" nor does he hold metaphysics to be rooted in how we talk rather than how we act, in discourse rather than in social reality. The *Investigations* is in large measure directed at exposing metaphysical speculation in our everything thinking, and it is central to Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, as Eagleton himself goes on to recognize, that philosophers "may not advance any kind of theory" (§109).[[17]](#footnote-17) Few philosophers are averse to theoretical speculation as Wittgenstein, and it strains the imagination to think he would have defended the primacy of everyday practice and "purely linguistic reasons".[[18]](#footnote-18)

In particular it is difficult to see why §116 of the *Investigations*, which Eagleton quotes in full, should be condemned as reactionary. There is nothing untoward from a left-wing perspective (or especially congenial to a right-wing perspective) about philosophers – the "*we*" of the final sentence of §116 – trying to bring words like "knowledge", "being", and "object" back from their metaphysical use to their ordinary use. Indeed Wittgenstein's strategy is much the same as the social critic's strategy of mentioning facts about the way society functions to show simple conceptions of it are untenable. Had Wittgenstein unequivocally endorsed our everyday uses of language he could perhaps be regarded as reactionary. (It would depend on what is at stake – it is not reactionary to defend long-standing uses of words like "justice" and "rights" in a totalitarian state.) In §116, however, Wittgenstein's point is only that a few reminders about normal usage may be an excellent antidote to the philosopher's common habit of using words unthinkingly in unusual ways.

Similarly it is hard to see how §38 and §109 lend support to Eagleton's complaint. To maintain that a "queer conception springs from a tendency to sublime the logic of our language" and to regard philosophy as "a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" is not to imply that language is the root of all evil.[[19]](#footnote-19) In fact Wittgenstein seems more inclined to the opposite opinion since he frequently reminds us that we are apt to accept views that are wrong, misguided or incoherent for other than "purely linguistic reasons". It is not for nothing that he deplores our "craving for generality" and notes that we frequently embrace explanations because of their "charm".[[20]](#footnote-20) He takes such extra-linguistic considerations to be no less harmful than self-serving wishes; for him they are as influential – and as pernicious – in philosophy as radicals reckon similar factors to be politics.

But how, if not as "reactionary", should Wittgenstein's remarks about ordinary language be understood? One possibility is that he would have us regard all propositions, those of everyday life as well as those of high-blown philosophy, as requiring careful scrutiny (provided there is reason to think they need it). When he speaks of philosophers bringing words "back from their metaphysical to their everyday use", he does not exempt everyday language but takes it to be open to – and often in need of – critical examination. Far from presupposing the existence of a well-defined body of everyday use against which metaphysical speculation can be compared, he takes the job of uncovering the ordinary to be far from straightforward. Philosophical criticism, as Wittgenstein conceives it, is comparable to the sort of criticism radicals often mount against prevailing social arrangements, his conception of metaphysical and ordinary uses of language being much like their conception of ideological thought and its real basis.

*4. Genova and Wittgenstein's alleged quietism*

*Often, Wittgenstein's remarks about philosophy are too harsh and minimizing to support [the revolutionary aim of breaking the fetters that bind us to our preconceptions]. After all, he never says: "I want to change your way of seeing"; rather, he only non-committally puts another picture before us. In fact, he insists that philosophy can have no normative role:*

*Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it.*

*For it cannot give it any foundation either.*

*It leaves everything as it is.... (*PI *124)*

*Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.... (*PI *126*)[[21]](#footnote-21)

The remarks from §124 and §126 of the *Investigations* that Genova thinks pose a problem for taking Wittgenstein's philosophy to have radical consequences are often singled out as having special relevance for politics.[[22]](#footnote-22) For Genova and many other readers they lend credence to the conception of Wittgenstein as a conservative thinker and the only question is whether they should be taken at face value or explained away. Naturally enough those who, like Genova, would like to regard Wittgenstein as siding with political radicalism see his remarks as problematic while those at the other end of the political spectrum think they could hardly be plainer. It is, however, questionable whether §§124-126, taken as a whole, transfer to politics and whether there is anything here for conservatives to celebrate and radicals to lament. Wittgenstein's discussion is limited in scope and its implications more apparent than real.

In §124 and §126 Wittgenstein does not deny, explicitly or implicitly, that we can change the world, our lives or our "way of seeing". What concerns him in these sections and the intervening section is language and mathematics, his main point being that philosophy has no business telling us how we speak or how to deal with contradictions. The burden of his discussion is that philosophy is limited to describing language and mathematical practice since it cannot give them foundations, these being neither available nor needed. In the passage from §124 Wittgenstein speaks of philosophy leaving everything regarding language as it is, and in the passage from §126 he speaks of it – philosophy again – as being incapable of explaining or deducing anything (and as having to confine itself to spelling out what is possible). His point is that philosophy leaves things as they are, not that nothing should ever be changed.

Wittgenstein is not in any interesting sense a linguistic conservative.[[23]](#footnote-23) He never says our language should never be changed, only insists that the value of changing it is for speakers of the language themselves to decide. His contention here and elsewhere is that philosophers have no special competence to recommend shifts of usage and should instead direct their attention to unraveling the conceptual knots we all too often tie ourselves up in. Just as it is for mathematicians to decide how to deal with division by zero, so it is for us as citizens, community activists, lawyers, parliamentarians and the like to decide how our political and social affairs should be arranged. What counts are the needs and interests of the people involved, not the opinions of philosophers. Philosophy still has the "normative role" of exposing misuses of language, ideological misuses no less than any other sorts of misuse; it just does not have the role philosophers often suppose.

Whatever criticism Wittgenstein may be subject to, he is not open to the charge of regarding ordinary language as fully in order or that of taking mathematicians' casual discussions of mathematics to be perfectly acceptable. Rather the reverse. It is one of his constant refrains that we get into philosophical difficulties because we are misled by our normal ways of talking and mathematicians are prone to speaking informally about numbers, sets and the rest in confused ways. The *Investigations* is largely concerned with philosophical speculation fueled by our forms of expression, and a central theme of the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* is that mathematics is frequently encumbered by gratuitous metaphysical assumptions. Wittgenstein has little time for ordinary language philosophy, ordinary mathematical philosophy or any other sort of ordinary philosophy, and it is no accident that Wittgenstein should say in the section omitted by Genova: "This entanglement in our own rules is what we want to understand" (§125).[[24]](#footnote-24)

*5. Scheman on social construction*

*Discussions about the political implications of Wittgenstein's writing rest on the question of whether we can acknowledge that the ground of our discourse is socially constructed and still attempt to use that discourse to mount a critique of its own ground. Or are the implications necessarily relativistic or conservative: deprived of any neutral ground to stand on, do we have to accept on its own terms any "form of life" richly enough articulated to stand on its own?[[25]](#footnote-25)*

In this short passage, which occurs as an aside in a discussion of the history and politics of "the knowing subject", Scheman succinctly states a difficulty that many have felt regarding the political implications of Wittgenstein's philosophy. If we are not to take what Wittgenstein says about "forms of life" to lend aid and comfort to conservatism, it would seem we must regard him as suggesting that one "form of life" is as good as another. The only way out would appear to be, as Scheman notes, to argue that the discourse associated with a form of life can be used "to mount a critique of its own ground". What needs to be shown is that forms of life and the grounds of our discourse, though "socially constructed", are nonetheless susceptible to criticism. Worries about the lack of neutral ground will then evaporate, there being no other reason to think our forms of life and discourse are beyond critical appraisal.

Scheman is surely right to talk of relativism and conservatism practically in the same breath. While relativists often take themselves to be radicals, and conservatives often devote considerable effort to denouncing relativism, the two views go hand in hand.[[26]](#footnote-26) Both sides despair of finding "neutral ground" of the sort to which philosophers aspire and both take the all-important question to be how we should respond to this awkward fact. They differ only over whether we should stick with what we have or concede that nobody's view is better than anyone else's. For the conservative, there is no good reason to change (and imposed change is pretty much bound to have unintended consequences). For the relativist, there is no good reason to favour our own form of life (and there is nothing to be said for foisting our political preferences on anyone else – not even, perhaps, on ourselves). Construed within the framework of traditional philosophy, then, the choice between conservatism and relativism boils down to nothing more than a choice between sloth and fashion, indifference and mindlessness, or something equally trite.

But how clear is it that Wittgenstein thinks "the ground of our discourse is socially constructed"? To his way of thinking, the idea that discourse is constructed, socially or otherwise, and has grounds could not be more problematic. While allowing that discourse is not a natural kind, he would reject the suggestion that it is constructed. And while recognizing it does not have a basis in scientific, historical or any other kind of fact, he would question whether it is helpfully, even intelligibly, described as unconstrained. As he never tired of stressing, language is a "method of representation", not a representation (*PI*, §50). It is something we use to talk about the facts, something that is integral to our form of life, "[c]ommanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, [being] as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing" (§25).[[27]](#footnote-27)

Wittgenstein would undoubtedly take issue with the presupposition – common to political views cast within the framework of traditional thinking – that it makes sense to speak of "discourse" as open to criticism and justification (in a deeper way than it is criticized and justified in daily life and in science). He would not for a minute accept the view that lacking sufficient neutral ground, we are forced to choose between accepting the discursive practices we have and regarding all such practices equally. This conclusion, he would insist, follows only given the dubious assumption that discourse can be sensibly be regarded as varying independently of its "ground". For him, as for many other philosophers, discourse is interwoven with its "ground", and it makes no sense to speak of its being confirmed or falsified by empirical or any other sort of fact. There is no need to worry about the absence of "neutral ground" if only because discourse cannot be coherently conceived as "grounded" in any philosophically interesting sense.[[28]](#footnote-28)

*6. Bloor on Life, Practice and Being*

*Wittgenstein's texts show how, time and again, he develops the characteristic themes of conservative thinkers. Take, for example, the notion of Life. My life, says Wittgenstein, shows what I know and what I am certain about (*OC*, 7). 'My life consists in my being content to accept many things', he tells us elsewhere (*OC*, 344). A language-game, we are reminded, is not something reasonable or unreasonable: 'It is there – like our life' (*OC*, 559). Closely connected with the category of Life is that of Action. Goethe is quoted: 'Im Anfang war die Tat' – in the beginning was the deed (*OC*, 402). Justification must come to an end somewhere, says Wittgenstein, but it does not end in a state of intellectual doubt or in the apprehension of self-evident truths. It ends in an ungrounded way of acting (*OC*, 110). ... Doubting is parasitic: an acquired skill for directing attention at limited areas of belief (*OC*, 283, 310-17). So there we have it. The entire categorical framework of conservative thought: authority, faith, community – all woven together to show the priority of Life over Reason, Practice over Norms, Being over Thought*.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Much of what Bloor says here has been considered already. It does not follow from the fact that Wittgenstein stresses that we have to accept many things and believes that justification and explanation must stop somewhere that he accepts the "entire categorical framework of conservative thought". And there is little to be gleaned from his criticism of pictures of human activity as subservient to what goes on in a realm behind the scenes, this being acceptable to political thinkers of virtually every stripe. Indeed it is tempting to retort at this juncture: No, "we do [not] have it" – authority, faith and community are not even mentioned in the passages cited. Still Bloor's discussion deserves a further look. The remarks from *On Certainty* are not isolated remarks and it is tempting to read them as showing Wittgenstein favors some form of social or political anti-rationalism.[[30]](#footnote-30)

To begin with it is worth noting that Wittgenstein does not in the quotations Bloor gives (or, to my knowledge, anywhere else) insist on "the priority of Life over Reason, Practice over Norms, Being over Thought". He never treats reason as subservient to life, norms as subservient to practice, or thought as subservient to being and action (and he certainly eschewed the practice of capitalizing notions when writing in English). Moreover it is hardly credible that he quoted Goethe because he thought deeds are what count and words inconsequential. The reason the slogan appealed to him, I take it, was that it provides a dramatic counterbalance to the usual philosophical assumption that in the beginning was the word.[[31]](#footnote-31) His object was to question the priority of "Reason" over "Life", not to invert the picture and defend the priority of "Life" over "Reason".

Wittgenstein is, to be sure, critical of the Enlightenment conception of human activity with its emphasis on "Reason", and it is not fortuitous that echos of Michael Oakeshott's attack on political rationalism are often discerned in his work.[[32]](#footnote-32) But the difference between Wittgenstein's version of critical philosophy and the positive philosophy one finds in the writings of Oakeshott and like-minded conservatives could scarcely be greater. The reason Wittgenstein accords scant attention to the anti-Enlightenment conception with its emphasis on "Life" is not that he thinks it is correct. He disregards it because he thinks it has much less of a grip on our thinking than the Enlightenment conception. His attitude towards political rationalism and political anti-rationalism would not, I believe, be significantly different from his attitude towards mentalism and (metaphysical) behaviorism.[[33]](#footnote-33) In both cases he would deem traditional thinking to be worth wrestling with and dismiss the alternative as too shallow for serious attention.

It would be closer to the mark to view Wittgenstein as firmly rejecting what Bloor calls the "framework of conservative thought". Far from agreeing that reason and life, norms and practice, thought and being are opposed, he would insist that they are inseparable. Were one to ask him how he thinks of these categories, he would doubtless stress that reason is an important part of life, norms are integrated in practice, and thought is essential to being.[[34]](#footnote-34) For him an "acquired skill for directing attention at limited areas of belief" – be it doubting or reasoning or anything else – is not in any interesting sense "parasitic" on life, practice and being. He would not object to commonsense talk of traditions of protest and criticism, still less deny that argument is itself a practice. Just the opposite, he would point out that every political sally, whatever its form and object, is launched from within an accepted framework of belief.

While the thrust of these observations has been largely negative, it would be wrong to conclude that Wittgenstein's remarks have no social or political implications. It is one thing to recognize that Wittgenstein does not promote a substantive view about how we should live our lives or how societies ought to be organized (or advance substantive theses about the world, language or the mind that lend support to such a view), quite another to suggest he says nothing that bears on the question. It is beyond dispute that his remarks encourage us to think of ourselves, individually and as a group, as being on our own and foster the idea that we cannot, singly or collectively, rely on anyone or anything to do our thinking for us. As we work through Wittgenstein's writings we find ourselves coming more and more to appreciate that the world we live in is our world and it is up to us to decide what we want to make of it (within the circumstances we find ourselves in). This may be thin gruel – it tells us virtually nothing about the sorts of social organizations we should strive for. But it is for all that a salutary conception, one that may be of cardinal importance in times when ideology is palmed off as part of the natural order of things.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Wittgenstein does not say any of this (at least not in so many words) and he would in all likelihood ridicule the suggestion that there is something deep here, something worth asserting and arguing for. This is not because – or not only because – he was more interested in his own moral and spiritual well-being than in how the rest of us should live our lives (and was genuinely appalled by philosophers, Russell especially, who take on the mantle of prophet or moral advisor). It is rather because he took his task, early and late, to be the critical one of tearing down idols, and he had no wish to create idols of his own.[[36]](#footnote-36) The conception of philosophy underwriting a political program would have been an anathema to him, and he would have deprecated any attempt, however well-meaning, to force a vision of social life down our throats. Still there remains the fact that his remarks remind us of an important fact about the human condition. A philosophy directed at "destroying ... houses of cards and ... clearing up the language on which they stand" can hardly fail to lend support to the heretical idea of a world free of superstition and mythology.[[37]](#footnote-37)

1. I do not set much store by remarks like "Russia: The passion is promising. Our waffle, on the other hand, is powerless" (*Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, ed. B. McGuinness, Blackwell, 1979, p. 142) or by Wittgenstein's comments about contemporary civilization with "its fascism and socialism" (L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Blackwell, 1980, p. 6; written in 1930). For Wittgenstein's attitude towards the Second World War, see B. McGuinness, "It will be terrible afterwards, whoever wins", in *Portraits of Wittgenstein*, ed. F.A. Flowers III (Thoemmes Press, 1999), pp. 137-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I discuss common views about Wittgenstein's political outlook in "Was Wittgenstein a Conservative Thinker?", *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 23, 1985, pp. 465-474. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wittgenstein was fond of ridiculing the French politician who believed French words occur in the order they are thought (L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, 1958, §336, and *Philosophical Grammar*, Blackwell, 1974, p. 107). Also see L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (Blackwell, 1980), Volume II, §713: "Just think of how often we can't say: someone is honest or dishonest, sincere or insincere. (A politician, for example.)" [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the *Tractatus* (tr. C.K. Ogden, Routledge, 1933) Wittgenstein speaks of "the right method" in philosophy as one of waiting until "someone else wishe[s] to say something metaphysical" (6.53). See also *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 183, where Wittgenstein states that now (i.e. in 1931) he adheres to this method. I do not explore the bearing of Wittgenstein's criticism of philosophical speculation for political theory. I shall only say I am disinclined to think Wittgenstein meant his metaphilosophical remarks to be used as an ax to chop down inquiry. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. G. H. von Wright, "Wittgenstein in Relation to his Times", in *Wittgenstein and His Times*, ed. B. McGuinness (Blackwell, 1982), p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Here and in what follows I am concerned only with the issues raised by the passages quoted. I do not mean to insinuate that the authors I discuss do not have interesting things to say. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Compare K. Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte" in *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics*, ed. L.S. Feuer (Doubleday, 1959), p. 320: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under conditions chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past". [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Blackwell, revised edition, 1978, part II, §23. Compare A. Manser, *The End of Philosophy: Marx and Wittgenstein* (University of Southampton, 1973), p. 13. In Manser's view Wittgenstein's remark about the sickness of a time is antithetical to Marx's contention in the *German Ideology* that "[t]he real, practical dissolution of ... phrases, the removal of ... notions from the consciousness of men, will ... be affected by altered circumstances, not by theoretical discussions". For reasons that elude me Manser takes Marx to differ from Wittgenstein since "Marx believed that men acting together could consciously alter their circumstances". K. Fann takes a similar line in his "Wittgenstein and Bourgeois Philosophy", *Radical Philosophy* #8, 1974, p. 27, as does J. Nyiri in his "Wittgenstein and Traditionalism", *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 28, 1976, p. 509. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A. O'Hear, "Wittgenstein and the Transmission of Traditions", in *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. O'Hear aims to show that despite Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* "­the Wittgensteinian perspective, while deeply conservative, need not and should not be taken in a relativistic way" (p. 55). Here I concentrate on the apparent irrationalism in the passages O'Hear mentions. "Wittgenstein's relativism" is discussed at length in connection with religion in K. Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion*, forthcoming, chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Wittgenstein's remarks about science in *On Certainty* are often compared with Kuhn's. See, e.g., G. H. von Wright, *Wittgenstein* (Blackwell, 1982), pp. 180-181: "'Revolutions' in science consist in an overthrow of established paradigms and the acceptance of new ones. This is a good illustration for Wittgenstein's idea about the role of world-pictures [in *On Certainty*]. But the illustration stands in need of much more elaboration than given to it by Kuhn". In this regard it is worth noting that Kuhn compares scientific revolutions with political revolutions in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, second edition, 1970), p. 92; also compare p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In my opinion the *Investigations* affords an excellent example of how persuasion can work in philosophy. See my *Wittgenstein's* Investigations *1-133* (Routledge, 2000), especially pp. 1-4 and pp. 204-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *On Certainty*, §96-9. Also compare §79 of the *Investigations*. When Wittgenstein says: "The fluctuations of scientific definitions: what to-day counts as an observed concomitant of a phenomena will to-morrow be used to define it", he not suggesting such changes are unreasonable or capricious. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, eds. J. Klagge and A. Nordmann (Hackett, 1993), p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. T. Eagleton, "Wittgenstein's Friends", *New Left Review* #135, 1982, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, e.g., H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Beacon Press, 1991), p. 173, and E. Gellner, *Words and Things* (Penguin Books, 1968), p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. But see E. Gellner, *op. cit*., pp. 248-249, where Wittgenstein is upbraided for inconsistency. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. In the German as well as the English Wittgenstein can be read as saying either that philosophy is a battle waged with language against bewitchment or that it is a battle against the bewitching effect of language. On neither reading, however, are "non-reactionary" battles against ideological uses of language excluded. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. L. Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, Blackwell, 1958, p. 18; and *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (University of California Press), 1970, p. 24. There are interesting parallels between Wittgenstein's observations and Marcuse's remarks about false needs (*op. cit.*, pp. 4-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. J. Genova, *Wittgenstein: A Way of* Seeing (Routledge, 1995), pp. 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See K. Fann, *op. cit.*, p. 27,A. Janik, *Essays on Wittgenstein and Weininger* (Rodopi, 1985), pp. 136-7, and A. Skillen, *Ruling Illusions* (Harvester, 1977), p. 10. H. Marcuse takes the proposition that philosophy leaves everything as it to be "incorrect" as a "general proposition on philosophic thought" (*op. cit*., p. 173). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This is clear even from the discussion of the builders in §§2, 8, 21, etc, of the *Investigations*. Wittgenstein had no objection to deviant use of language in and of itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. On §§124-126, see also my *Wittgenstein* Investigations *1-133*, pp. 192-6 and pp. 200-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. N. Scheman, *Engenderings* (Routledge, 1991), p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. There is a irony here. Whereas radicals used to defend rules and standards, now conservatives do; and whereas conservatives used to criticize radicals for sticking to their principles, they now criticize them for not having any. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I discuss some of the pitfalls of social constructivism in "Two Historiographical Strategies: Ideas and Social Conditions in the History of Science", in *Scientific Rationality: The Sociological Turn*, ed. J.R. Brown (Reidel, 1984), 183-208. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Richard Rorty's "Wittgensteinian" politics rest largely on what I take to be his overreaction to the fact that practices are not the sort of things that have grounds. For a detailed discussion see A. Crary, "Wittgenstein's Philosophy in Relation to Political Thought", in A. Crary and R. Read (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein* (Routledge, 2000), pp. 118-145, and P. Forster, "Problems with Rorty's Pragmatist Defence of Liberalism", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 25, 2000, pp. 345-362. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. D. Bloor, *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge* (Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 161-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Also compare E. Gellner, "The Gospel according to Ludwig", *American Scholar*, 53, 1984, p. 254: "Wittgenstein's appeal lies in the fact that he provides a strange kind of vindication of romanticism, of conceptual *Gemeinschaft*, of custom based concepts rather than statute-seeking reform, and that he does so through a very general theory of meaning rather than from the more usual premises habitually used for this purpose". [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. In fact the remark occurs in a discussion of Moore's claims to know the truth of certain propositions unconditionally. Also I might mention in passing that Wittgenstein's reference to Goethe sits poorly with the view that he privileges ordinary language. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See, e.g., O'Hear, *op. cit.*, p. 43. Oakeshott's attack is perhaps clearest and most vigorously presented in the title essay of his *Rationalism in Politics* (Basic Books, 1962). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See especially *Investigations*, §§307-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Compare §7 of the *Investigations* where Wittgenstein characterizes language-games as "consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven". Also in this connection it is worth recalling the kinds of language-game listed in §23 of the *Investigations*, and the comparison Wittgenstein draws in the same section between "the multiplicity of tools in language" and "what logicians have said about the structure of language". [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Stanley Cavell summarizes the outlook I take to inform Wittgenstein's thinking especially well in his "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Philosophy", in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 52: "We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. [Footnote omitted.] Nothing insures that this pro­jection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as noth­ing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an asser­tion, when an appeal, when an explanation — all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life.' Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon noth­ing more, but nothing less, than this". This, Cavell adds, "is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying". [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Compare *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, p. 171: "All that philosophy can do is destroy idols. And that does not mean creating a new one – for instance as in 'absence of an idol'". I shall not speculate on whether this was what Wittgenstein was alluding to when he told Theodore Redpath that "he *could* not [discuss politics]" (T. Redpath, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Student's Memoir*, Duckworth, 1990, p. 94.) [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Investigations*, §118. I am grateful to Lynne Cohen and Paul Forster for helpful comments on an earlier draft. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)