INFORMATION TO USERS

SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY:
WITTGENSTEIN AND SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Michael Joseph Temelini
Department of Philosophy
McGill University, Montréal
May 1999

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial
fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-50268-6

Canada

To my father, Dr. Walter Temelini and
In memory of my dear mother, Louise Ann Temelini

ABSTRACT

This thesis calls into question a currently orthodox view of Ludwig Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian philosophy. This view is that the social and political implications of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* are conservative and relativist. That is, Wittgenstein's concepts such as 'forms of life', 'language-games' and 'rule-following' defend and promote: a rule-determined and context-determined rationality; or an incomparable community-determined human understanding; or a neutralist, nonrevisionary, private or uncritical social and political philosophy.

In order to challenge and correct this conventional understanding the thesis sets up as 'objects of comparison' a variety of very different examples of the use of Wittgenstein in social and political philosophy. These uses are neither relativist nor conservative and they situate understanding and critical reflection in the practices of comparison and dialogue. The examples of this 'comparative-dialogical' Wittgensteinian approach are found in the works of three contemporary philosophers: Thomas L. Kuhn, Quentin Skinner and Charles Taylor.

This study employs the technique of a survey rather than undertaking a uniquely textual analysis because it is less convincing to suggest that Wittgenstein's concepts might be used in these unfamiliar ways than to show that they have been put to these unfamiliar uses. Therefore I turn not to a Wittgensteinian ideal but to examples of the 'comparative-dialogical' uses of Wittgenstein. In so doing I am following Wittgenstein's insight in section 208 of the *Philosophical Investigations*: "I shall teach him to use the words by means of examples and by practice.-And when I do this, I do not communicate less to him than I know myself." Thus it will be in a survey of various uses and applications of Wittgenstein's concepts and techniques that I will show that I and others understand them.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse mets en question l'inteprétation actuellement orthodoxe de la philosophie que Ludwig Wittgenstein a élaborée dans les années qui suivent la publication du *Tractatus logicus philsophicus*. L'ortodoxie courante soutient que la portée sociale et politique d'une oeuvre telle que les *Investigations philosophique* est conservatrice et relativiste. Les concepts 'forme de vie', 'jeu de language', 'adoption de la norme' auraient l'effet de protéger et promouvoir soit une rationalité determinée par la norme et le contexte, soit une forme de connaissance humaine qui est à la fois incomparable et determinée par la communauté, soit une philosophie sociale et politique à caractère privé et neutraliste qui ne permet ni révision ni critique.

Pour mettre en question et corriger cette inteprétation doxique, l'étude deploie comme 'objets de comparaison' une série d'exemples qui démontrent comment la philosophie sociale et politique de Witttgenstein peut être utilisée dans des directions qui ne sont ni relativistes ni conservatrices, et qui, pultôt, situent la connaissance et la réflexion critique dans le champ pratique de la comparaison et du dialogue. Ces exemples d'une methode qui s'approprie de la pensée de Wittgenstein tout en demeurant 'comparative-dialogique' proviennet des oeuvres de trois philosphes contemporains: Thomas L. Kuhn, Quentin Skinner, et Charles Taylor.

Cet étude emploie la techinque du "tour d'horizon" aussi bien que des analyses textuelles parce qu'il est plus probant de démontrer ce qu'on a déjà accompli avec les concepts élaborés par Wittgenstein, plutôt que de suggérer ce qu'on pourrait éventuellement accomplir à partir de ces concepts. Conséquemment, je ne m'occupe pas d'un Wittgenstein idéal, je examine plutôt les exemples d'un usage 'comparatif-dialogique' de Wittgenstein. Dans cette approche, je suis la pensée exprimée par Wittgenstein dans la séction 208 des *Investigations philosophiqes* : "Je lui enseignerai à employer les mots par les exemples et la pratique. - Et lorsque je fais cela, je ne lui communique pas moins que ce que je connais moi-même." Un tour d'horizon des différents usages qu'on peut faire des concepts et techiques élaborés par Wittgenstein est, donc, la meilleure façon de demontrer que ceux-ci ont été compris par d'autres philosophes de même que par l'auteur de cette étude.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am greatly indebted to all those who gave their assistance at various stages in my research and in the writing of this dissertation. I am also very grateful to all those who helped to enrich my graduate student experience throughout my years at McGill, an experience without which this work could not have been written.

First, I would like to thank the faculty, administrative support staff and graduate students of the Department of Philosophy of McGill University for the rich and rewarding intellectual environment they provided me, particularly Nicholas Adamson, Karen Bardsley, France Emond, Michael Hallett, Leslie MacAvoy, Kathryn Morris, Miriam McCormick, Rebecca Pates and Dale Turner as well as Claudine Lefort, Angela Fotopoulos and Barbara Whiston who were always helpful and patient in guiding me through the university's bureaucratic maze. In the Department of Political Science I am grateful to Samuel Noumoff and to Emilia Scognamiglio for their many years of support and friendship. I would also like to acknowledge the important role of the staff of the McLennan and Redpath Libraries and the custodial staff of the Leacock Building - Union des employés et employés de service Section Locale 800 - especially my friend Gaspar Palermo, all of whom worked with dedication and professionalism to provide McGill students an excellent work environment, in spite of serious and damaging budget cuts.

For their patience, support and care I am very grateful to my friends: Kevin Atkinson, Sarah Atkinson, Tasha Bollerup, Michelle Braiden, Eugenio Bolongaro, Jean Chapman, Eric Darier, Catherine Degnan, David Emelifoenwu, Zahra Habib, Penny Kerrigan, Nancy Kingsbury, Martha-Marie Kleinhans, Rebecca Kingston, Brad Lavigne, Roberto and Ivana Ludovico, Lauchlan Munro, Tamara Myers, Margaret Romain, Christopher Ryan, Renée

office of le Confédération des syndicats nationaux, Guy Beaulieu and Robert Harpin.

To three people I owe a special word of thanks. Once is my dear friend and colleague, Ravi Chimni, who played an important role in sparking my interest in social and political philosophy as well as Wittgenstein. I am indebted to him for our many years of stimulating conversations and friendship. Charles Taylor helped to supervise my work, read various drafts, offering his wealth of knowledge and kindness to guide my progress. To James Tully I owe most of all. Professor Tully's work on Wittgenstein and political philosophy is the inspiration for this dissertation and I am pleased to acknowledge this debt. He supervised me from the beginning and read the whole draft making numerous suggestions and criticisms and provided encouragement and support at every stage.

I was very fortunate to be a student at McGill at a time when Charles Taylor and James Tully offered a diverse collection of courses in the history of social and political theory from ancient to modern. Their lectures and seminars, sometimes jointly taught, were always a source of great inspiration, discussion and even disagreement to the graduate and undergraduate community at McGill. Their scholarship, dedication to teaching and willingness to listen and learn from their students made McGill one of the finest universities in the world for the study of social and political philosophy. I am greatly indebted to Charles Taylor and James Tully not only for having been imparted the content of their lectures but also for showing me good examples of a dialogical approach to pedagogy.

Finally I am grateful to Mark and Vita Temelini, Leonard Temelini, my late mother Louise Temelini and my father Dr. Walter Temelini whose love and inspiration helped me to cross the finish line.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER III -
Charles Taylor's 'Background of Distinctions' and
'Language of Perspicuous Contrast'

CHAPTER IV - Quentin Skinner:
History as 'Object of Comparison' and the Text as Technique of Persuasion 137

CHAPTER I

'Leaving the World as It Is': Wittgenstein, Conservative, Relativist

I.   Introduction: A Prevailing Orthodoxy

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, Wittgenstein writes:

> 23. ...Here the term "language-*game*" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life....

> 124.   Phi..osophy 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....

> 126.   Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.— Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us.

> 211.   How can he know how he is to continue a pattern by himself — whatever instructions you give him?— Well, how do I know?—— If that means "Have I reasons?" the answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons.

> 217.   "How am I to obey a rule?"—if this is not about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do. If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do."....

> 219.   ...When I obey a rule, I do not choose.
> I obey the rule *blindly*.

> 241.   "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?"—It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. This is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.

Furthermore, in Part II, xi, 226e, he writes:

> What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*.

These short remarks are well known and often quoted. They are examples of Wittgenstein's concepts of 'rule-following' and 'form of life' which are used to illustrate the 'background' conditions of reason and understanding. These passages also appear to offer insights on the nature of human society and of human social relations.That is, they seem to be signs of Wittgenstein's enigmatic and unaccounted for social and political philosophy.

My aim is to examine a prevailing orthodoxy about what the concepts of 'rule-following' and 'form of life' entail for social and political philosophy. For many commentators these concepts, particularly as they are explained in the passages cited, entail a relativist approach. By 'relativist' they mean a variety of claims such as: the view that having a framework or scheme for knowing or grasping reality is a chimera or dispensable (and so we should resign ourselves to the natural and causally contingent character of the universe); or that reason and understanding are unavoidably context-bound or rule-determined. In both cases philosophy can at best be a therapy against foundational claims to know rather than an activity that allows us to compare and evaluate and (depending on the purpose) mediate, reconcile, arbitrate or adjudicate conflicting claims to truth. Furthermore this 'relativism' entails an attitude of 'Pyrrhonist' political conservatism.[1]

---

1 Richard Popkin argues that the Pyrrhonian sceptic is to be distinguished from the 'Dogmatists', who asserted that some truth about the world can be known, and the Academic sceptics, who asserted that we possess no guaranteed criterion or absolute standard for determining which of our judgements are true or false. The Pyrrhonists considered that both the Dogmatists and Academics asserted too much ('something can be known' and 'nothing can be known') and proposed instead to suspend judgement on all questions on which there seemed to be conflicting, insufficient or inadequate evidence, "including the question of whether or not something could be known." Richard H. Popkin, "Preface" *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979) xv. The sceptic's activity was characterized by: the practice of doubt, through the deployment of counter-arguments to oppose any claims to know; *epoché*, or the mental attitude of suspense or assent or belief achieved through the practice of doubt; and *ataraxia* - the goal of epoché, suspension of judgement - quietude, the unperturbed and tranquil mind, in which the sceptic was no longer concerned about matters beyond appearances. David R.Hiley, "The Deep Challenge of

I will argue that there is another way of reading Wittgenstein, one that does not entail such relativist and conservative implications. On this view it does not follow from our recognizing that there may be a variety of different practices and different ways of seeing things that we must also abandon our attempts to find overlapping similarities, to compare, mediate, arbitrate, adjudicate or reconcile rival, conflicting or uncombinable practices. Nor does it follow from the fact that our practices are woven into our languages of explanation and understanding that our concepts can only be uncritical endorsements for prevailing customary activities. With this non-relativist Wittgensteinianism we can critically reflect on, assess, compare or evaluate our practices; with this non-conservative Wittgensteinianism we do not simply follow customary understandings but we make judgements about them too, we 'obey the rules' and 'go against them in actual cases.'

Gellner's Attack Against Wittgenstein's 'Neutralism'

One of the first philosophers to level the charge that Wittgenstein's implications for social and political philosophy are relativist and conservative was Ernest Gellner. In his sweeping attack on Wittgenstein, in

---

Pyrrhonian Scepticism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, 2 (April, 1987): 188. Scepticism was thus a therapy, a cure "for the disease called Dogmatism or rashness." Popkin, Ibid, xv. David Hiley adds that because the Pyrrhonists directed their attack against the desirability of knowledge as against its possibility this had a fundamentally moral character since what was at issue was whether knowledge could bring happiness. Ibid., 185. According to Hiley by emphasizing scepticism's doubt about the *possibility* of knowledge, contemporary epistemology has lost the moral point of ancient and early modern scepticism, namely its doubt about the *desirability* of knowledge. It is this moral purpose of Pyrrhonian scepticism which poses a deeper challenge, because the practical consequences of its anti-philosophical position is an apology for the existing order. Ibid., 188-89. The 'Pyrrhonian' is, following Popkin, someone who lives according to her natural inclinations, the appearances he is aware of, and the laws and customs of her society, "without ever committing himself to any judgement about them." Popkin, *Scepticism*, xv. Following Popkin and Hiley I will use the term 'Pyrrhonian' to denote not simply the opposition to the dogmatism of philosophical theory, but also to identify the political implications of such an 'anti-philosophical' epistemology. I employ the term to indicate the political goal of Pyrrhonism: the suspension of belief in order to live tranquilly in accordance with custom . Hiley, 186-87.

Words and Things, Gellner concludes that the implications of linguistic philosophy for politics "can be described as either neutralist, or conservative, or irrationalist."[2] Neutralism follows from the remark that "philosophy leaves everything as it is" which for Gellner means that "to specify the general rules of the game describable as 'political thinking' is not to take sides in it or to make moves within it: to specify the rule of chess is not to play chess." The implications of the rule-following argument is either "that the rules cannot or need not or should not be changed" or that "to change or to specify them is not a move within the game", or that "to change them is extra-philosophical or extra-political." Gellner adds "But, of course, political conflicts have for centuries been *about* and not *within* the general conceptual game."[3] In his *Legitimation of Belief,* Gellner continues this line of attack by interpreting Wittgenstein's claim that "What has to be accepted...is...forms of life" as "the immodest, dogmatic and *carte blanche* endorsement of all and any 'form of life'." He sees this passage as an "uncritical endorsement of each and every little local culture and circle of ideas."[4]

Winch: The Authority of Wittgenstein's Rule-Essentialism

The assumption that Wittgenstein's philosophy is sceptical and its implications for social and political theory are conservative runs throughout the literature. But one need not turn to such a hostile critic as Gellner to find similar conclusions about Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following and forms of life. In fact in 1958, a year prior to the publication of Gellner's *Words and Things,* Peter Winch implied very similar relativist conclusions in his

2 Ernest Gellner, *Words and Things: A Critical Account of Linguistic Philosophy and A Study in Ideology* (London : Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1959) 223.

3 Ibid.

4Ernest Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief* (London & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 20.

The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy.[5] Here Winch uses Wittgenstein's remarks about rule-following as the basis of an attack against the idea of a positivist social science. But Winch's reading of rule-following is based on an assumption about the context-dependency of understanding, and it is here that it slips into a kind of relativist approach. Winch interprets Wittgenstein's remark that we grasp the meaning of a concept by 'obeying the rule' in actual cases as the claim that "the analysis of meaningful behaviour must allot a central role to the notion of a rule" and "that all behaviour which is meaningful...is *ipso facto* rule-governed."[6] For Winch the acceptance of authority is essential to rule following "not just something which, as a matter of fact, you cannot get along without if you want to participate in rule-governed activities." Rather, to participate in rule-governed activities, "*is* in a certain way, to accept authority."[7] Winch tells us:

> To eschew all rules - supposing for a moment that we understood what that meant - would not be to gain perfect freedom, but to create a situation in which the notion of freedom could no longer find a foothold. But I have already tried to show that the acceptance of authority is conceptually inseparable from participation in rule-governed activities.[8]

Winch considers an objection to this view, that there are some kinds of activity, or ways of life that are not circumscribed by rules: "The free-thinking anarchist", for example "certainly does not live a life which is circumscribed

---

5 Peter Winch, *The Idea of A Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

6 Ibid., 52-53.

7 Peter Winch, "Authority," *Political Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Quinton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) 99. See also Peter Winch, "Certainty and Authority," *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays* ed. A. Philips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 223-237.

8 Winch, "Authority" 102.

by rules in the same sense as does the monk or the soldier...."9 While the anarchist eschews explicit norms as far as possible, "...that does not mean that we can eliminate altogether the idea of a rule from the description of his behaviour."10 This is because the anarchist's way of life is *a way of life* and can be distinguished, for instance "from the pointless behaviour of a berserk lunatic. The anarchist has reasons for acting the way he does; he *makes a point* of not being governed by explicit rigid norms." Although he makes choices, the anarchist's mode of behaviour "presupposes the notion of a rule."11 Winch uses this against Oakeshott's claim that human behaviour can never be captured by explicit "precepts", that human behaviour can be adequately described in terms of the notion of habit and custom.12 Winch's reply is that rules, (which may be inarticulate rules) are essential to human social activity, consequently correct understanding is a matter of having acquired an implicit rule.13 It is also important to note that Winch interprets 'acting differently' to mean doing the opposite of a rule:

> Understanding something involves understanding the contradictory too: I understand what it is to act honestly just so far as and no farther than I understand what it is not to act honestly.14

My argument is that for Wittgenstein, 'going against' a rule is not simply doing its opposite, but rather the ability to use a word in new and creative ways and to take a multitude of paths that lead off in every direction.

Winch is of course, not referring to 'general' rules when he says social

---

9 Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* 52.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 53.
12 Ibid., 55-57.
13 Ibid., 57, 58-63.
14 Ibid., 65.

relations are rule-governed, and he persuasively uses Wittgenstein against the prevailing claims that understanding is simply the application of general laws and statistical or causal regularities to particular situations. As he states:

> 'Understanding', in situations like this, is grasping the point or meaning of what is being done or said. This is far removed from the world of statistics and laws: it is closer to the realm of discourse and to the internal relations that link the parts of a realm of discourse. The notion of meaning should be carefully distinguished from that of function, which is popular with certain sociologists. The latter is a quasi-causal notion, which is perilous to apply to social institutions.[15]

For Winch, it is clear that general rules cannot apply to human activities because such activities are "governed by conventions" and where one is dealing with conventions, "one is dealing with internal relations."[16] But this view lends itself to another form of relativism. Because ideas are internally connected with "a way of living", therefore "ideas cannot be torn out of their context" so no kind of comparison across different social relations is possible.[17]

Two more recent examples of Wittgensteinian relativism are evident in the arguments of Richard Rorty and Saul Kripke. Rorty's relativism stems from his anti-foundationalism, while Kripke's stems from his context-determinism.

Rorty' Scepticism: "Breaking the Crust of Convention"

Perhaps the most well-known example of the 'relativist' reading of Wittgenstein that rejects the very idea of a 'framework' for knowing is the argument of Richard Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Rorty's

---

15 Ibid., 115-116.
16 Ibid., 131.
17 Ibid., 107-111.

attack on epistemology-centred philosophy which he takes to be the posing of questions concerning the 'foundations' of knowledge is simultaneously a rejection of the very idea that there is a successor-subject or alternative to traditional epistemology.[18] According to Rorty, the three most important philosophers of this century - Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey - each tried in his early years to find a new way of making philosophy "foundational" - a new way of formulating an ultimate context for thought. In his later work each of the three broke free from the "Kantian conception of philosophy as foundational, and spent time warning us against those very temptations to which he himself had once succumbed." Accordingly, Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian philosophy is "therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systematic, designed to make the reader question his own motives for philosophizing rather than to supply him with a new philosophical program."[19]

With this reading, Wittgenstein is placed squarely in the camp of Pyrrhonist political scepticism. As a "great edifying philosopher" Wittgenstein is peripheral and reactive not constructive. He does not "offer arguments" and is "skeptical *primarily about systematic philosophy*, about the whole project of universal commensuration." He makes it as difficult as possible to take his thought "as expressing views on traditional philosophical problems, or as making constructive proposals for philosophy as a cooperative and progressive discipline."[20] Wittgenstein's therapeutic, edifying philosophy is

---

18 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) 380.

19 Ibid., 5-6, 367-68. The notions of "foundations of knowledge" and of philosophy as revolving around the Cartesian attempt to answer the epistemological sceptic are set aside by the philosophers Rorty reviews. He says 'set aside' because their attitude toward the traditional problematic is that it is pointless to address the bad arguments of their predecessors. Ibid., 6

20 Ibid., 368, 369.

aimed at "continuing a conversation rather than at discovering truth."[21] Its goal is "the infinite *striving for truth* over 'all of Truth'"[22], "to keep inquiry going" and "to see keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation...to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately."[23]

> If we see knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scier tists or philosophers, but rather as a right, by current standards, to believe, then we are well on our way to seeing conversation as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood."[24]

Rorty calls this view 'relativist' but not in the pejorative sense of the anti-epistemologist who is attacked for lacking moral seriousness because she will not join in "the common human hope" the "universal human aspiration" toward objective truth and 'commensuration'. Rather,

> ...to look for commensuration rather than simply continued conversation—to look for a way of making further redescription unnecessary by finding a way of reducing all *possible* descriptions to one—is to attempt to escape from humanity. To abandon the notion that philosophy must show all possible discourse naturally converging to a consensus, just as normal inquiry does, would be to abandon the hope of being anything more than merely human. It would thus be to abandon the Platonic notions of Truth and Reality and Goodness as entities which may not be even dimly mirrored by present practices and beliefs, and to settle back into the 'relativism' which assumes that our only useful notions of 'true' and 'real' and 'good' are extrapolations from those practices and beliefs.[25]

---

21 Ibid., 373.

22 Ibid., 377.

23 Ibid., 377-78.

24 Ibid., 389.

25 Ibid., 377.

So the point of edifying philosophy is to keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth. In the view Rorty is advocating such truth "is the normal result of normal discourse." But edifying philosophy is "abnormal" and "can *only* be reactive" having sense "only as a protest against attempts to close off conversation by proposals for universal commensuration through the hypostatization of some privileged set of description."[26] Edifying philosophy "falls into self-deception whenever it tries to do more than send the conversation off in all new directions."[27]

According to Rorty such "new directions", conceptual innovations, are not the point of edifying philosophy, "only accidental byproducts." The point of this philosophy

> ...is always the same—to perform the social function which Dewey called 'breaking the crust of convention', preventing man from deluding himself with the notion that he knows himself, or anything else, except under optional descriptions.[28]

And so, following this reading of Wittgenstein, Rorty offers neither a new theory nor a "grounding for the intuitions and customs of the present"[29] but "only suggestions about why the search for such a theory is misguided." His book "like the writings of the philosophers [he admires] is therapeutic rather than constructive."[30]

---

26 Ibid., 377.
27 Ibid., 378.
28 Ibid., 379.
29 Ibid., 12.
30 Ibid., 7.

Kripke: Wittgenstein and Community-Agreement

A different example of Wittgensteinian relativism is offered by Saul Kripke in his *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Kripke's claims about Wittgenstein's scepticism (and the debates surrounding them) are well-known, and I will not rehearse the conflicting positions of the debate here.[31] Instead I am interested in showing the ways that Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein entails a view that, while in many ways is very different from Rorty's, is in other ways quite complementary and thus contributes to a misrepresentation of Wittgenstein that I want to oppose.

Kripke explains that Wittgenstein identifies a sceptical problem that emerges because a rule applied many times in the past should, but does not, "uniquely determine" or "compel" new instances or applications.[32] Wittgenstein's solution to the 'sceptical paradox' that emerges from the rule-anarchism he identifies is to replace a "theory of truth conditions" with a "theory of assertability conditions" and thereby found meaning on the enforcement of community standards. Kripke states:

---

31 The most impressive (and highly polemical) response to Kripke by far is offered by G.P.Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, *Scepticism, Rules and Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), (currently out-of-print) and Baker and Hacker, *Wittgenstein Rules, Grammar and Necessity: An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations, Volume 2* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985). Also impressive is the response to Kripke offered by David Stern, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 175-186. See also: Arthur Collins, "On the Paradox Kripke Finds in Wittgenstein," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy Volume XVII: The Wittgenstein Legacy*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (Notre Dame Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) 74-88; Barry Stroud,"Mind, Meaning and Practice," *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. Hans Sluga and David G. Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 296-319; Souren Teghrarian, "Rule-Scepticism and Wittgenstein's Theory of Meaning," *Philosophy of Law, Politics and Society: Proceedings of the 12th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, ed. Ota Weinberger, Peter Koller and Alfred Schramm (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1988) 342-345.

32 Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982) 7-10.

...Wittgenstein 's theory is one of assertability conditions. Our community can assert of any individual that he follows a rule if he passes the tests for rule following applied to any member of the community.[33]

Kripke claims that this is not to give necessary and sufficient conditions for correct use,[34] but depends on "agreement, and on checkability - on one person's ability to test whether another uses a term as he does."[35] The 'sceptical solution'

...turns on the idea that each person who claims to be following a rule can be checked by others...in the community [who] check whether the putative rule follower is or is not giving particular responses that they endorse, that agree with their own.[36]

It is hard to see how 'testing' and 'checking' can exist at all on Kripke's account in the absence of strict rules for use. Nevertheless, even if there are none, some authoritative standard followed uniformly by the community is imposed. The community will "have justification conditions for attributing correct and incorrect rule following to the subject, and these will not be simply that the subject's own authority is unconditionally to be accepted"[37] and "a deviant individual whose responses do not accord with those of the community in enough cases will not be judged, by the community, to be following its rules; he may even be judged to be a madman, following no coherent rule at all."[38]

---

33 Ibid., 110.
34 Ibid., 87.
35 Ibid., 99.
36 Ibid., 101.
37 Ibid., 89.
38 Ibid., 93.

Lear: Wittgenstein's "Doctrine of Noninterference"

In "Leaving the World Alone" Jonathan Lear invokes the same relativist and conservative assumptions defending a view that Wittgenstein's philosophy is essentially 'nonrevisionary' and a "doctrine of noninterference". The task of philosophy is "to understand the world, not to change it." Whatever its value, "philosophy should leave our linguistic practices and, in particular, our theory of the world as they are."[39] Since no explanation will guarantee understanding, therefore learning the correct use of our terms is a matter of sharing "routes of interest, perceptions of salience: it is a matter of his being minded as we are." Thus the fact that we acquire our concepts in the correct way on the basis of our language training has "no explanation or justification: it is simply something we do." Lear adds, that there is "no legitimate vantage point from which to compare the content of our training with what we get out of it; there is no place from which to measure our experience in independence of our beliefs and judge that there is slack between them."[40]

According to Lear,"the central task of philosophy, for Wittgenstein, is to make us aware of our mindedness." This task will be obscured "so long as we think that some of our key practices...have any justification." However, when we are freed from "the need to construct spurious justifications for our practices" then "we are at last able to say, 'that's simply what we do.'"[41] "Insofar as philosophy makes us aware of our mindedness, it will awaken us to beliefs and practices that have no explanation or justification. There is no room to offer philosophical arguments for or against beliefs and practices for which there are no reasons."[42] However, this does not imply that philosophical reflection will never have any revisionary effect upon any of our beliefs and

---

39 Jonathan Lear, "Leaving the World Alone,"*The Journal of Philosophy* LXXIX. 7 (July 1982): 382.
40 Ibid., 394.
41 Ibid., 401.
42 Ibid., 391.

practices, but such effect is and should be unintended, a "by-product" of philosophical activity.[43]

Dunn: An Inadequate Philosophical Approach to Rational Critique

Observing the conventions apparent in these examples of Wittgensteinian scholarship, John Dunn captures the spirit of the orthodoxy when he writes:

> Thus far, it seems fair to say, no one sympathetic to Wittgenstein's philosophy has succeeded in giving a very convincing account of its implications for social or political philosophy.The view that these are in fact inadvertently and ludicrously conservative has been pressed from an early date by Ernest Gellner; and, on this score at least his argument have never received a cogent answer.[44]

Following the account given by Gellner, Winch, Rorty and Lear, Dunn argues that it is easy to identify the negative and conservative implications of Wittgenstein's writings; these arise from Wittgenstein's emphasis that practices and forms of life constitute "a reality beyond which no human appeal can be made." While this "may be philosophically valid", what remains elusive "is just what positive implications it would have, if it were indeed valid, for ethical, social and political values."[45] The prevailing debates do not help since they provide "less than felicitous guesses" as to their presumed positive implications for social and political philosophy. Dunn suspects that it may be "the extreme scepticism of Wittgenstein's

---

43 Lear writes: "from a Wittgensteinian perspective, the philosopher's primary concern should be not to change those beliefs, though that may be a by-product of philosophical activity, but to make us aware of our being so minded as to change them given a certain stimulus." Ibid.

44 John Dunn, "The Future of Political Philosophy in the West," *Rethinking Modern Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1985) 175. Dunn refers to Ernest Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief* and Ernest Gellner"Concepts and Society," *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970) 18-49.

45 Ibid., 174, 175.

philosophical position which is responsible."[46]

Wittgenstein is sceptical, Dunn claims, about the existence of "conclusive and wholly extra-human epistemic standards". Logic, natural science and mathematics may be seen not as external authorities over us but "highly ingenious and skilful forms of activity which human beings happen to have devised". As a result there is a calling into question of the "juridical conception of philosophy as a competent judge, in virtue of knowing 'something about knowing which no-one else knows so well'". Authority in human cognition drifts from the philosopher and "settles wherever in more everyday life it is presumed to lie"[47] Citing Lear, Dunn describes this as a Wittgensteinian emphasis on "forms of life as a reality beyond which no human appeal can be made."[48]

Dunn wonders whether Wittgenstein was "justified in this contention that philosophy leaves the world as it is."[49] Although imaginative, this picture remains elusive as to its positive implications, and worse,

> [since] the question of whether an existing assemblage of human practices is essentially appropriate as it stands or whether it requires drastic and systematic reconstitution is at the core of social and political theory, a simple appeal to the authority of practice has no determinate content and is necessarily either evasive, insidious or vacuous.[50]

Dunn identifies a "brooding conservative preoccupation with the fragility and indispensability of forms of human life", a theme he suggests follows

---

46 Dunn, "Rethinking" 175, 176.

47 Ibid., 174.

48 See footnote 16. Ibid., 174.

49 A phrase Dunn borrows from Lear "Leaving the World Alone". Dunn, "Rethinking", 171, fn 1.

50 Dunn "Rethinking", 174.

self-consciously in the intellectual footsteps of Wittgenstein and observes a "substantial overlap" which exists between this theme and "the broader range of revulsion, drawing heavily on Marx, Aristotle and Plato to the alienated modern view of human social existence." Dunn concludes that "however culturally sensitive, this "hardly makes a very adequate philosophical approach to the rational critiques and prudent revision of human practices."[51]

Dunn's claim that Wittgenstein's later philosophy is inadequate to "the rational critique and prudent revision of human practices" is a reading of Wittgenstein he derives not simply from the authors already cited, but from two other attempts to determine the significance of Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian position for social and political philosophy: Hanna Pitkin's *Wittgenstein and Justice* (first published in 1972) and John W. Danford's *Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy*.[52] What is notable among them is much of their analyses presuppose the sceptical and conservative assumptions I outlined earlier. This leads Dunn to comment about their efforts that the most influential lesson drawn from Wittgenstein's arguments has been the inanity of a positivist social science but "on the central question of how to envisage a rational critique of practices in a world in which the authority of practices is the final cognitive authority, none makes a clear advance."[53]

Pitkin: 'Form of Life' as Psychoanalytic Therapeutic Acceptance

Pitkin adopts a more sympathetic approach than Gellner, but ultimately fails

---

51 Ibid., 175.

52 Hanna F. Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* (1972; Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993); John W. Danford, *Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982).

53 Dunn, "Rethinking" 176.

to respond to the charge of conservatism. When Wittgenstein says that "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language..." he means that our "forms of life should be accepted as given."[54] Pitkin's proposal on how we could change that form of life is somewhat confusing. Acceptance of our form of life means "giving up some dreams of change as impossible" but it can also "be a foundation... for genuine change."[55] The change Pitkin is taking about is not social or political innovation, but personal, "self-knowledge."[56] Unlike traditional political philosophers who offer "fairly concrete proposals for remedial action along with their diagnoses of social ills, Wittgenstein "has no plan, no program, no alternative course of action to propose. He is truly not a political theorist but a philosopher, giving us a clear vision of the current state of affairs...."[57]

Pitkin reads Wittgenstein through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis in that it has "no message" nor "something positive and constructive to offer"[58] and yet it is designed to liberate its practitioners from self-imposed constraints. Since constraints are self-imposed, we cannot escape them, and so the Wittgensteinian therapy prescribes "a certain relaxation of direct effort" which is to say "withdrawing temporarily from substantive engagement with the world into a kind of introspective contemplation...."[59] Accordingly, this therapeutic liberation lies in acceptance of "what truly cannot be changed":

> ...the unconditional acceptance of the past, which cannot be changed, and the unconditional acceptance of the present world and our present selves, not because they cannot or should not be changed, but precisely

---

54 Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* 338.
55 Ibid., 338.
56 Ibid., 336.
57 Ibid., 339.
58 Ibid., xxiv.
59 Ibid., viii-ix.

as the only realistic basis for effective and gratifying change.[60]

Pitkin argues that therapeutic freedom lies "not in plurality or changed patterns of life" but in "the acceptance of the inevitable, or our real selves and our situation" and "accepting what truly cannot be changed means that the acceptance of reality is the only possible basis for genuine change, as the basis of who we are and what we value...."[61]

This argument about therapeutic acceptance is tacked on to a causal understanding of conceptual innovation and change. On this view, the concept of 'forms of life' denotes our conventions and practices and these are fixed foundations not random and arbitrary activities.[62] Furthermore, adopting a "duality of purpose and institutionalization", a separation of our concepts and "the institutions and practices they are (supposedly) realized in", Pitkin presumes that an ideal understanding can serve as a neutral standard of critical reflection. The concept of 'justice' for example includes "both form and substance", both "conventionalized, traditional social practices and an idea that is an ideal by which to measure them."[63] Languages therefore are "objective entities", "apart from" and "independent of" any particular users, something "imposed on... the individual from the outside",[64] something "detached" and "standing outside of" the conventional standards.[65] Language is the superstructure of human consciousness resting on the base of conventions, institutions and practices on "history...governed by inner

---

60 Ibid., x.

61 Ibid., 338-339.

62 A form of life is "not of our choosing", an "underlying natural precondition", something "fixed by the nature of human life itself", an underlying natural regularity, something "not subject to renegotiation at will", a general law, a self-imposed constraint. Ibid., 122-123, 124-125, 132-134, 138, 197.

63 Ibid., 190-191.

64 Ibid., 194-195.

65 Ibid., 192.

general laws."⁶⁶ Conceptual change, on Pitkin's view (like the crude historical materialism that inspires it) is not impossible but causal and dialectical; we can "criticize... renovate... and revise" by keeping our concepts "aloof from the practices and institutions they are (supposedly) realized in."⁶⁷ Social change is inevitable but unintended, a "natural selection" occurring behind the backs of the agents involved.⁶⁸

Pitkin's views on how critical reflection might be envisaged are further complicated by her attempt to address the charge that the implications of this account for political thought must be conservative. The basis of Pitkin's argument is a distinction between Wittgenstein's views on language and its implications for political action; while acknowledging that the former is very conservative, she argues that the latter may not be. While Wittgenstein's view of langauge is very conservative (individual innovations in rule-following in word-use "are deeply controlled") we "need not apply to politics" this image because "there are important ways that political membership is not like membership in a language group, or a culture, or even a society."⁶⁹ Assuming a very narrow definition of 'language', Pitkin cites three areas of difference. First, innovation in politics is revolutionary, collective, public, deliberate and intentional while innovation in language is individual.⁷⁰ Second, while politics is defined by "conflict, power and interest", language is

---

66 Ibid., 197. As Pitkin cites Engels here, the resemblances to his views are intentional.

67 Ibid., 190.

68 Ibid, 196-198 Pitkin writes here that "as in language... so in history" change has "drift" and "direction", a uniform "driving force" of historical cause. Further examples of Pitkin's thesis on the cunning of reason is her claim that language-games are "vulnerable systems"that we deviate from when we have the 'impulse' to do so; one day "something snaps" in the hitherto customary obedience to such closed systems. Ibid., xvii, 200

69 Ibid., 201.

70 "people simply do not stage linguistic revolutions, draft new linguistic patterns, or band together in a new language group." Pitkin adds that linguistic change is 'legislated' "in the service of cultural nationalism. But this is hardly typical of innovation in language." Pitkin, 201.

not.[71] The third difference has to do with mechanisms of enforcement. The laws and regulations of a political order carry sanctions,[72] the "regularities of cultural patterns and language" on the other hand, "are internalized", they do not need to be enforced. With language rules "it is not a matter of 'obedience' or 'enforcement'."[73] In short, the rules of language and culture are not imposed or enforced but are internalized unlike politics which is characterized by "the active enforcement of norms, typically through a specialized agency, and by the possibility of deliberate, active, collective innovation or imposition of patterns."[74] Pitkin concludes that the analogy with language misleads us into thinking that politics is on the one hand "totally noncoercive" and on the other hand "totally passive at the collective level".[75]

Danford: The Impossibility of Comparison, The End of Political Philosophy

Following Pitkin's analysis on *Investigations* II.xi, 226e, John Danford sees the concepts of 'language-game' and 'form of life' as 'conventional' and by this he means "natural", based on "very general facts of nature"[76] and invoking Pitkin "not subject to renegotiation at will."[77] Forms of life are not "fixed simply by custom or agreement" but are nevertheless 'fixed' by "the nature of human life itself...the exigencies of life that all men share." Our forms of life are "the regularities of convention" and consequently "the foundations upon which our lives together are based."[78] Furthermore, these foundational

---

71 According to Pitkin, it is rare that some individual or group has "a serious stake in the maintenance or alteration of linguistic patterns" and it is rare if ever that change in language is "effected or prevented by the exercize of power" except in special cases "where language is politicized." Ibid., 202.

72 They "must sometimes be enforced because they are sometimes violated." Ibid., 202.

73 Ibid., 202- 203.

74 Ibid., 203.

75 Ibid., 203.

76 *Investigations* Part II.xii, 230. Danford,*Wittgenstein* 116.

77 Danford, *Wittgenstein* 117. Cf Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* 138.

78 Danford, *Wittgenstein* 117, 118.

conventions are not 'true' or 'false'[79]; they are "part of our language", they are a "kind of seeing on our part" and they are not capable of being ordered, ranked or compared. There is "no sharp distinction between...forms of life", they are "what has to be accepted, the given."[80] Because a human form of life is 'in order as it is', not subject to remedy by philosophical reflection[81], we therefore "must understand a human form of life on its own terms." Comparing Wittgenstein's view to Plato's, Danford writes:

> For Wittgenstein, there may not exist any natural horizon to which we can ascend by means of philosophy; there may only be a variety of "caves", and no standard for comparison. If this is the case, philosophic enquiry can be concerned only with coming to understand better one's own linguistic cave; and thus political philosophy, which is the name for the enterprise of comparison, is no longer a possibility.[82]

Because a form of life is not something that can be changed, because there may only be the variety of conventions, and "no standard for comparison" among them, Danford concludes, as Pitkin does, that "if philosophy is useful, it is useful on a personal or individual level" and philosophical inquiry can be concerned only with coming to understand one's own language and not the social and political implications of language. The practical implication here is Socrates' prescription in the *Apology*, that is, public indifference: "philosophy does not need to pay any attention to politics" and "politics to most of us is a phenomenon we may ignore or not as we please."[83]

To round out this section, I will now review a few more notable examples of the relativist and conservative interpretations of Wittgenstein's later

---

79 Ibid., 119.
80 Ibid., 120.
81 Ibid., 195.
82 Ibid., 202.
83 Ibid., 201, 202.

philosophy. An article that defends the conservative reading is J.C. Nyíri's "Wittgenstein's Later Work in relation to Conservatism" (published 1982). A book that takes for granted the relativist reading is A.C. Grayling's *Wittgenstein* (published in 1988) which is a contribution to the Oxford University Press introductory series,*Past Masters*. [84]

Grayling: Linguistic Idealist, Anti-Realist, Cultural and Cognitive Relativist

As an illustration of the conventional manner in which the 'relativist' view of Wittgenstein is taken I want to review now the treatment of Wittgenstein's later philosophy by A.C. Grayling. Grayling describes Wittgenstein as a linguistic idealist[85], anti-realist, cultural relativist[86], cognitive relativist and a kind of communitarian[87]. He is an anti-realist because:

> ...the world is dependent upon the 'form of life' of which language is a part; at the very least, there is no question of the correct use of language being decided by something independent of language - we do not go right or wrong in language use according to whether we correctly describe objective facts, but rather according to whether we follow mutually agreed and observed rules of our linguistic community. The community as a whole cannot go right or wrong either; it just goes; the only constraints on use are the internal ones founded on agreement and custom. Provided that changes in use were systematic across the

---

84 A.C. Grayling, *Oxford Past Masters: Wittgenstein* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); J.C. Nyíri, "Wittgenstein's Later Work in relation to Conservatism," *Wittgenstein and His Times*, ed. Brian McGuinness (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982) 44-68.

85 He is an idealist because "...the patchwork of heterogeneous practices in which language is involved" is "somehow autonomous, as though language floats free of anything like objective reality..." Grayling, *Wittgenstein* 102.

86 Wittgenstein's method follows the "thesis" of cultural relativism in that "there are differences between cultures or societies or between different phases in the history of a single culture or society, in respect of social, moral and religious practices and values". Ibid., 105.

87 He is a communitarian because: "language use is essentially a matter of public agreement"; because "language use is a rule-following activity"; the rules are "constituted by agreement within a language community" and "only within such a community can one succeed in following rules." Ibid., 109-111.

whole community no change would - because no change could - be detected.[88]

Grayling argues that cultural relativism is not philosophically problematic because "we can recognize the differences *as* differences" and this shows that "there are points in common between cultures which allow mutual access and hence mutual understanding to take place. On the other hand cognitive relativism is "a troubling thesis". This is the view that

> there are different ways of perceiving and thinking about the world or experience, ways possibly so different that members of one conceptual community cannot at all grasp what it is like to be a member of another conceptual community.[89]

Grayling calls this the view that "we can never have more than an indeterminate grasp, at best" in trying to understand a set of practices that one is not part of. The basis of cognitive relativism, then, is a paradox since understanding an alien conceptual scheme, or form of life, necessarily requires translating the aliens' concepts, beliefs, and practices into our own terms, "which is the only way that we, from our own standpoint, can make sense of them."[90] On this view it is possible and even likely that there are radically rival and uncombinable schemes. This view

> ... makes the concepts of truth, reality and value a matter of what sharers in a form of life happen to make of them at a particular time and place, with other forms of life at other times and places giving rise to different, perhaps utterly different or even contrary, conceptions of them.[91]

---

88 Ibid., 102-103.
89 Ibid., 105.
90 Ibid., 105.
91 Ibid., 106.

In effect, this means that these concepts are not "concepts of truth" but "concepts of opinions and belief" or something relative to the conceptual community.[92] Further evidence that Wittgenstein follows this view is the claim that the meaning of a word is its use "governed by the rules agreed among the sharers of a form of life."[93] It follows "that the possibility of there being other forms of life...with different agreements and rules, means therefore that each form of life confers its own meaning on 'true' and 'real' - and therefore truth and reality are relative not absolute conceptions."[94] Grayling finds the consequences of this claim completely untenable: not only is it anthropocentric ("truth is human truth, reality is human reality") but the concept of a 'form of life' seems to propose a "radical" and "extreme relativism" because the notion of a form of life might be that "cognitive relativities follow the same demarcation lines as cultural relativities."[95] This is unacceptable because we cannot recognize another form of life *as* another form of life. If we are to talk about 'other forms of life' at all we must be able to recognize them as such, "we have to be able to *recognize* the differences" and such recognition is only possible "against a shared background." If everything were different, Grayling warns, "participants in one form of life could not even begin to surmise the existence of the other." Therefore this requirement for mutual accessibility between forms of life "gives the lie to cognitive relativism."[96]

Grayling calls 'form of life' a conceptual scheme that "underlies" and 'gives content' to our language games; "the 'bedrock' which provides the ultimate

---

92 Ibid., 106.

93 Ibid., 107.

94 Ibid., 107.

95 Ibid., 107.

96 Ibid., 108.

basis for meaning, use, rules, knowledge, and the psychological concepts";
something on which 'truth', 'reality' and 'value' are dependent.
Wittgenstein's remarks suggest "relativism across forms of life" and
"relativism in a single form of life across time".[97]

Nyíri: Wittgenstein as Neo-Conservative Saviour

With the publication in 1982 of J.C. Nyíri's "Wittgenstein's Later Work in
Relation to Conservatism", the conservative reading of Wittgenstein finds a
more forthright and sympathetic defender whose intervention sparks a
debate around Wittgenstein's personal political beliefs and their relation to
his published remarks. Nyíri claims that the tone of Wittgenstein's analysis,
the content of his remarks and the historical circumstances in which this
philosophy came into being "definitely invite an interpretation in the light
of which there indeed emerge family resemblances between Wittgenstein on
the one hand and some important representatives of conservatism on the
other."[98] He claims that Wittgenstein "saved the neo-conservative position
from theoretical catastrophe."[99] This catastrophe is what Nyíri calls the 'neo-
conservative paradox': on the one hand "man [sic., passim] by his very nature,
cannot do without absolute standards" and "fixed truths", but on the other
hand "all absolute standards have perished" and "fixed truths do not
exist."[100] Wittgenstein solved this problem with the concept of 'following a
rule'. His insight is to supplant an "anarchistic" conception of human
behaviour, speech and thought with a conservative one that emphasizes

---

97 Ibid., 104-106, 109.

98 Nyíri cites as proof of Wittgenstein's conservatism: his admiration for Russian spiritualism in
Dostoevsky; the "essential influence" of Spengler, ("the most influential neo-conservative thinker of the post-
war years"); Wittgenstein's acknowledgements to the conservative playwright and essayist Paul Ernst; and
his similarities with Michael Oakeshott's criticism of rationalism . The historical context is "the neo-
conservative spiritual milieu of the time." Nyíri, "Conservatism" 51-52, 54, 61-64.

99 Ibid., 57.

100 Ibid., 56.

"training and behaviour, use, custom, institution, practice, technique, agreement." Following a rule is "a custom, an institution, embedded in agreements, in the correspondences of behaviour within society."[101] Rule-following is always blind, it cannot be explained or justified. Nyíri writes:

> although any given form of life, mode of thought and behaviour, can be superseded by or have superimposed upon itself other forms of life, it cannot actually be criticized. All criticism presupposes a form of life, a language, that is, a tradition of agreements; every judgement is necessarily embedded in traditions.[102]

Thus "traditions cannot be judged" and "these different forms of life have the same value" and they have an "inexorable binding force."[103] On this interpretation, conceptual innovation is not precluded but "the new rules would have to emerge from the old ones *organically*, so to speak."[104]

---

101 Ibid., 58.

102 *Ibid.*, 58-59.

103 *Ibid.*, 59.

104 Four replies to Nyíri are: Allan Janik, "Nyíri on the Conservatism of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," *Style, Politics and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Allan Janik (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989) 40-58; Grahame Lock, "Conservatism and Radicalism in Social Theory and Philosophical Method" *Philosophy of Law, Politics and Society*, 271-278; Naomi Scheman,"Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground" *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, 383-410; Joachim Schulte, "Wittgenstein and Conservatism" *Ludwig Wittgenstein Critical Assessments, Volume Four, From Theology to Sociology: Wittgenstein Impact on Contemporary Thought*, ed. Stuart Shanker (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 60-69. Janik argues that Wittgenstein's philosophy is not conservative but radical , while Lock argues that Wittgenstein is neither radical nor conservative. In Janik's case, while he claims to "wholly reject Nyíri's picture" he in fact admits that in general he is "more sympathetic to something like a 'conservative' reading of Wittgenstein's later philosophy...."Janik, "Afterword With Acknowledgements,"*Style, Politics and the Future of Philosophy* 265. Schulte rejects Nyíri's interpretation but goes on defend Wittgenstein by separating his presumed personal political orientation from his public silence on ethical questions. Schulte also defends a view he attributes to Wittgenstein that because no significant statements on matters of "absolute value" can be made, therefore social and political philosophy cannot be objects of rational discussion. Schulte, "Wittgenstein", 68. Naomi Scheman offers an "explicitly political reading" of 'form, of life' as a 'view of diaspora'. She argues that Wittgenstein's later philosophy can be best understood in light of Wittgenstein's unacknowledged "politicized identities": Jewish, queer, Austrian expatriate, unconventional philosopher, intellectual and social outsider. Schemen, "Forms of Life" 388, 409 note 41. Mobilizing a variety of feminist,

Janik: Becoming What our Guardians Want Us To Be

Responding to Nyíri, Allan Janik follows Lear's analysis when he asserts that Wittgenstein's remark that philosophy "leaves everything as it is" is not a "hopelessly unacceptable endorsement of the status quo" but only that "philosophy fails in her task of understanding the world when she directs herself to changing it." Janik adds that "[how] the world gets changed is another matter, one for which Wittgenstein believed nobody had an answer."[105] While he claims that Wittgenstein does not promote endorsement of the status quo, Janik ultimately supports the sceptical and conservative interpretation claiming that "grasping, let alone altering, the rules we follow is radically limited by our very rule following activity."[106] Like Winch, Janik insists on the primacy of rules, and in so doing makes Wittgenstein's philosophy into a kind of apology not for the status quo but worse, for enlightened despotism: "[to] use language" he writes "is in a certain sense, to be *ruled*" and "to learn anything we have to learn to follow rules blindly (as all army sergeants, novice masters and athletic coaches well know)." To be ruled means "to be subject to behavioural regularities" which we have "neither created nor approve of" and to be "constrained by the rules" not of our making.[107] Janik does not deny that "the rules we internalize as we are enculturated could be different" but authenticity entails first becoming "what your guardians want you to be" in the sense that "their rules establish

---

rabbinical, ecological and queer epistemologies Scheman claims that a form of life illustrates marginality, "our inability to recognize our home when we are in it." Ibid., 385. On this view the form of life ('home') is neither a "presently existing location", nor a "true Platonic home", nor something in order just as it is , nor "some place of transcendence". These views entail that there are those who are either "wholly native" to the practices in a form of life(a transcendental view) or "wholly strangers" to those practices (a view from nowhere). But there is another form of life -- the "outsider within" - those who are "neither stranger nor native" the diasporic identity, the view of the marginalized. Ibid., 388-89, 403-404.

105 Allan Janik, " Towards a Wittgensteinian Metaphysics of the Political," *Style, Politics and the Future of Philosophy*, 95.

106 Ibid., 108.

107 Ibid., 98.

the range of possibilities open to you."[108]

By the early 1990s, the evidence of the conservative and relativist reading are clearly apparent in the literature, and firmly entrenched as basic assumption about Wittgenstein's later work. Examples are found in a volume of essays based on the 1989-90 series of Royal Institute of Philosophy lectures given in London to mark the centenary of the birth of Ludwig Wittgenstein. The aim of the series is to present essays that reflect on "the degree to which Wittgenstein's influence, in and beyond philosophy, is apparent today; and the degree to which his work is relevant to other areas of thought than the purely philosophical."[109] Two notable attempts to address the relevance for social and political thought are J. Bouveresse and Roger Trigg, each of whom support the sceptical and conservative view. Bouveresse for example tells us that Wittgenstein's scepticism about progress is in accordance with "a general tendency of his philosophy which sees in instinct and will, and not in judgement and the intellect, what is foremost and fundamental" and Wittgenstein's view is that "the evolution of societies results essentially from desires, hopes, beliefs, refusals and acceptances, which are anything but scientific...."[110]

Trigg: Wittgenstein's Conceptual Relativism for the Social Sciences

Following Winch, Trigg claims that we understand the meaning of concepts by following a rule for the application of a concept, and "moreover one shared by a community"and the agreement in rules stems from "a shared form of life." In this sense "the priority of the public over the private forms

---

108 Ibid., 99.

109 "Preface," *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays,* ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) v.

110 J. Bouveresse, " 'The Darkness of this Time': Wittgenstein and the Modern World," *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays,* 23.

the basis for a stress on the shared nature of our life together."[111] According to Trigg, forms of life are either 'natural' or "are to be regarded as the ultimate", the given and what Wittgenstein means by 'given' in the 'form of life' is conceptual relativism. Forms of life "cannot be explained or justified", furthermore "[one] cannot reason about them, because reasoning can only take place within a particular context." Because "we can only think within the confines of a social practice", we cannot abstract ourselves from that context in order to reason about it. This context-determinism means that "it is through our participation in society that we learn to use language and hence to think." Participation, ('going native') is "an absolute precondition for any understanding."[112] As far as Trigg is concerned, this situation makes Wittgenstein's position compatible with a 'Marxist' analysis because of "the emphasis on the priority of social arrangements, and the desire for explanations at the level of society." It is also compatible with a conservative and "traditionalist" approach because under his view we are the product of the history of our society" and we cannot therefore change society "without attacking the very source of our being."[113] Trigg goes on to say that however Wittgenstein is interpreted from a political standpoint, what his views imply for social science are enormous. Wittgenstein's claim that philosophy "leaves everything as it is" means that philosophy and sociology "must accept language-games as given" which involves "a repudiation of any idea of justification, or of providing a rational foundation for activities and practices."[114]

---

111 Roger Trigg, "Wittgenstein and Social Science," Wittgenstein Centenary Essays, 210-212.

112 Ibid., 212-214. Trigg laments this situation since if social scientists 'go native' they cannot fulfil "a scientific role" but the alternative "appears to be an inevitable failure to grasp what is really going on inside a culture." Ibid., 214.

113 Ibid., 214.

114 Ibid., 215.

As Trigg sees it, while Wittgenstein's position undermines ethnocentricity, it comes with a huge price: "there is no scope for upholding or criticizing language-games when they just have to be accepted and described."[115] Since there is nothing left beyond our own society to which we can appeal, we have no way of knowing how we are mistaken. As he puts it,

> Humility towards other cultures is all very well but the paradox of a Wittgensteinian approach is that such humility has to go hand in hand with a blind acceptan :e of one's own form of life. One may not be able to claim one is right, but the fear of being wrong is forever removed. This is because where language-games and forms of life as such are concerned, no room is left for the notions of truth and falsity.[116]

The refusal to distinguish between subject and object of knowledge, the implicit attack on the possibility of unprejudiced reason (or what he calls "the power of human rationality"), the "acknowledgment of the primacy of instinct", the removal of the possibility of truth as a standard, constitutes a "direct onslaught on the very possibility of rationality and results in a "paralysing relativism" and nihilism. Furthermore because "no claims about anything can be made unless they are from the standpoint of some language-game or other" ethnocentricity is also inevitable since "no comparison of different societies is possible." A "proper comparison between societies is impossible" because "their concepts are going to be strictly incommensurable" In rooting reason in society, Wittgenstein "made it impossible to reason about society.[117]

II.   The Myth of the Unitary and Determinate Background

I want to explain now the various connections between these interpretations

---

115 Ibid., 216.

116 Ibid., 216.

117 Ibid., 218-219, 221-222.

of Wittgenstein's remarks. When we see the overall and detailed similarities, the various resemblances, a family portrait is visible. Much of the debate about whether Wittgenstein's concepts of 'rule-following' and 'form of life' are relativist and whether they are politically conservative stems from a deeper dispute about the concept of a 'background' and the possibility of grasping or understanding it. In this regard, there are two fundamental assumptions shared by virtually all the contributors to these debates: the background — that is, what grounds our social and political self-understanding — must be understood either as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions (or rules), or as a fixed and demarcated foundation, or both. In either case it is an argument Baker and Hacker call the 'determinacy of sense' and which I will refer to as the myth of the unitary and determinate background.[118] The myth of the unitary and determinate background is related to the Tractarian view that indeterminate sense makes communication impossible and so getting the essence of phenomena is the primary task of philosophy.

A debate about essence is about the possibility of a determining background. This can mean that something natural or unintended gives the correct meaning of concepts, that concepts have fixed boundaries, or that a unitary or comprehensive set of rules determines every possible correct application of a concept. Whether a set of finite rules or a sharply demarcated foundation, Wittgenstein considered the idea of a unitary and determinate background to be a deeply mistaken view. He also, as I will explain in the remainder of this chapter and in the proceeding chapter, makes an important distinction between the collection of human activities (the human condition or experience) that cannot be completely represented or framed, and how

---

118 G.P.Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein Understanding and Meaning: An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations Volume 1* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980) 315-450.

language can frame aspects of this experience for specific purposes. This crucial distinction between the 'background' and the frameworks and boundaries of language that we invent, debate and rank to help explain and evaluate the background is perhaps one of the most complex, least understood and most important aspects of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. I will argue that the confusion surrounding this distinction is the basis of the conservative and relativist views and it is precisely this conceptual confusion that needs to be addressed if this prevalent misleading interpretation is to be challenged at all.

Form of Life as Rule-Determinacy and Context-Determinacy

The argument about a unitary and determinate background is based on Wittgenstein's remark that understanding always occurs on the basis what is relied on and taken for granted - a form of life. Because human agents cannot be separated from their forms of life, any attempt to explain what a form of life is like will itself be part of the form of life; "it can have no more than the meaning it gets within the context of its use."[119] Because of the 'taken for granted' nature of forms of life, many Wittgenstein commentators take the concept to mean a necessary set of rules embedded in the form of life that determine meaning and understanding. Therefore the language of social explanation must include that of the agent's form of life itself. Moreover because the form of life cannot be transcended, the agent's socially-constituted self-understanding must be regarded as incorrigible. Because what is intelligible is context-bound, there are no neutral epistemic standards to rationally assess the conflicting claims to know given by forms of life. Since there are no neutral epistemic standards or culturally-invariant languages to adjudicate conflicting, rival or uncombinable forms of life, therefore forms of life must be regarded as incorrigible. Therefore the correct political attitude is

---

119 Lear, "Leaving the World Alone" 385.

'acceptance' of the prevailing explanation of things.[120]

One example then of the myth of the unitary and determining background is the view that the 'background' is a set of necessary, general, essential or comprehensive *rules*. This example is provided by Winch and Kripke, each of whom characterizes the concepts of 'rule following' and 'form of life' in rule-deterministic terms.[121] Winch, for example, cogently explains why on the Wittgensteinian view, understanding social relations cannot be "observational or experimental" or based on "generalizations and theories of the scientific sort to be formulated about them." Social explanation is not the application of generalizations and theories to particular instances but rather like applying one's knowledge of a language in order to understand a conversation rather than like applying one's knowledge of the laws of mechanics to understand the workings of a watch.[122] But by emphasizing the obedience to socially-constituted rules with internal incomparable standards, Winch effectively traps reason and understanding inside the social practices whose particularity he has so successfully defended. As Winch states "all meaningful behaviour must be social, since it can be meaningful only if governed by rules, and rules presuppose a social setting." The rules given by the social context *determines* sense: "*Verstehen* implies *Sinn* and *Sinn*, as I have argued, implies socially established rules."[123]

---

120 This summary owes a great deal to Charles Taylor's "Understanding and Explanation in the *Geisteswissenschaften*," *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, ed., Steven Holtzmann and Christopher Leich (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 191-210.

121 As I noted earlier, Winch argues that "the analysis of meaningful behaviour must allot a central role to the notion of a rule" and "that all behaviour which is meaningful...is *ipso facto* rule-governed"; that understanding "presupposes the notion of *following a rule*"; that rules are essential to human social activity and to participate in rule-governed activities is in a certain way to accept authority. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* 52-53, 57 and Winch, "Authority" 99.

122 Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* 110, 133.

123 Ibid., 116.

What Kripke and Winch effectively argue is that a set of rules given by the linguistic community is the background that determines correct use, and therefore correct understanding. Another example of the myth of the unitary and determining background is a contextual explanation, in which a 'form of life' is a unitary and determining *context*. On this conception, as David Stern explains, the tendency is to think of the 'form of life' as some specific thing to be referred to with a definite article, the Background, "something like the scenery on a stage, that makes it possible for actions on that stage to have the significance that they do." On this view (the capital-B) Background, is "the regress-stopper at the end of a search for the basis for what we ordinarily take for granted."[124]

The capital-'B' background is a fixed or demarcated background, a background sharply distinguished from its foreground, something apart from our lives. A form of life on this view is a tradition or agreement that cannot be judged or criticized. Lear, for example, argues that a 'form of life' shows that "we tend to agree in our judgements, our modes of thought, perceptions of similarity and relevance: on the fact that we are like-minded." A form of life reveals that a "person is minded a certain way", that he has "perceptions of salience, routes of interest and feelings of naturalness in following a rule...that constitute being part of a form of life" and furthermore there is no "getting a glimpse of what it might be like to be other-minded."[125] In the versions of Pitkin and Danford the background stands behind the use of words giving meaning and coherence and so reason and understanding are not really abilities but superstructural, quasi-autonomous and cunning processes, that occur behind the backs of the people involved.

---

124 David G. Stern, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 190.

125 Lear, "Leaving the World Alone" 385-387.

Because the background is something over which agents have no control, shaping their rational capacities in spite of themselves, a question arises about how in fact conceptual innovation occurs at all. Both examples of the argument for a unitary and determinate background, (rule and context determinacy) explain conceptual innovation and social change in immanent terms. Innovation is either impossible or (if it happens at all) is a 'by-product', a mysterious process that emerges 'organically', naturally , internally or mechanically - "given a certain stimulus."[126]

It might be argued that there is another option from Wittgenstein's point of view. Richard Rorty, for example, argues that we do not have to accept the very idea of a fixed or determining context or set of rules and the only rational response is to overcome it. Thus, any use of the word 'foundation' or 'background' or 'scheme' needs to be exposed as something imposed on us and constraining us in what is essentially a wholly causal contingent self and society, open to infinite interpretation and manipulation.[127] Here is where the issue has become bedeviled by multiple confusions, and becomes difficult to disentangle.[128] The commentaries on Wittgenstein's concepts of 'form of life' are caught between two options: the background is either something that cannot be criticized, because it determines meaning and understanding or the idea of a background is something that must be rejected because the essentially plural contingent universe is not subject to unitary and general laws. Our choice is either to accept the unitary background's determination of the world or anything goes; either accept a rule-determined or context-

---

126 Ibid., 391.

127 James Tully, "Progress and Scepticism," *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 274. Tully cites Rorty as a good example of this line of thought.

128 A phrase I borrow from Taylor, "Understanding and Explanation" 197.

determined background, or give up the idea of a background at all.

"A *Picture* Held Us Captive..."

This is obviously a variation of a debate identified by Richard Bernstein as the Kantian dramatic Either/Or and the 'Cartesian anxiety' - the philosopher's quest for categorical or objective foundations of morality, for a fixed Archimedean point upon which to ground knowledge.[129] But there are also important differences. The debate I am describing about a 'background' is not about the possibility of finding a categorical imperative, objective science or irrefutable apodictic certainty. Instead it is about the possibility of finding common, comprehensive or general standards of judgement, a tendency that Wittgenstein describes as "our craving for generality" which is to say "the contemptuous attitude toward the particular case."[130]

The tendency towards generality compels the philosopher to "give a definition" and "draw a sharp boundary" and "to find one definite class of features which characterize all cases" or examples of a concept rather than taking seriously what is less general: the cases and examples themselves.[131]

---

129 Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) 13, 16-18.

130 This craving, he argues, is the result of a number of tendencies: first, the tendency "to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term." For example, the inclination to think that it is on the basis of a common property of all games that we are justified in applying the general term 'game' to the various games; second, the tendency, rooted in our usual forms of expression, to think that understanding a general term thereby grants possession of a general picture, as opposed to particular pictures; for example, that understanding the term 'leaf' is possessing a general picture of a leaf, as opposed to pictures of particular leaves; third the idea that a general idea is connected to a mental state; fourth, our preoccupation with the method of science, by which Wittgenstein means the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws; and, in mathematics, of unifying the treatment of different topics by using generalization. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations" Generally known as The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) 17,18.

131 Ibid., 18-19.

This "contempt for what seems less general" ("the attitude towards the more general") is the "real source of metaphysics" and concomitantly "leads the philosopher into complete darkness."[132] Wittgenstein tells us:

> The idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation; for it has not only led to no result, but also made the philosopher dismiss as irrelevant the concrete cases, which alone could have helped him to understand the usage of the general term.[133]

An example of this craving for generality is Donald Davidson's claim that a necessary requirement of understanding is the adoption of a truth conditional theory of meaning. Davidson's project, as he explains throughout the essays in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*[134], is to answer the question, 'what is it for words to mean what they do?'. We would have an answer to this question, he claims, if we had or if we knew how to construct a theory of meaning that satisfies two specific necessary conditions: it must be universally applicable and 'verifiable' independently of the speaker.[135] Davidson's proposal is that a Tarski-style correspondence theory of truth can meet these necessary requirements of a theory of meaning. However, while Tarski intended to analyze the concept of truth by appealing to the concept of meaning, Davidson does the reverse, by considering "truth to be the central primitive concept, and...detailing truth's structure, to get at meaning."[136]

---

132 Ibid., 18.

133 Ibid., 19-20.

134 Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

135 The theory must "provide an interpretation of all utterances -actual and potential" and it must be verifiable "without the detailed propositional attitudes of the speaker." Ibid., xiii.

136 Ibid., xiv. Davidson, denies that truth can be explained by appealing to the facts becz·· ·e we cannot limit or pick out and describe the facts to which a particular (true) statement corresponds. As Ben H. Letson explains, "If all true statements correspond to the same fact, then clearly the worth of such correspondence is vitiated, for there would be no way to explain how it is that various features of the world make various statements true." Ben H. Letson, *Davidson's Theory of Truth and its Implications for Rorty's*

Davidson's claim is that a theory of meaning which defines the necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence. And truth conditions are given on the basis of the composition of the sentence - on "the roles of the words in the sentence". Giving the meaning of an expression depends on transforming the sentence of a natural language systematically into sentences of the formal language, the formal theory of truth for a natural language. Meaning is given by mapping the structure of a sentence onto the formal meta-language. Davidson's calls this formal theory a "comprehensive formal theory of truth for a language" that "brings into relief general features of the world" and "large features of reality."137

Pragmatism American University Studies Series V, Philosophy, Vol. 178, (New York: Peter Lang, 1997) 68-69. While Davidson rejects the correspondence relation between language and independently verifying facts, he does in fact propose a 'general theory' of truth in the form of a set of axioms that entail the conditions under which utterances are true. According to the theory he recommends, what he calls 'Convention T', truth is a property explained in terms of a relation called 'satisfaction' whereby the 'satisfiers' are "functions that map the variables of the object language on to the entities over which they range - almost everything, if the language is English." Davidson"True to the Facts," *Inquiries*, 46-48; "Semantics for Natural Languages," *Inquiries*, 56; "In Defence of Convention T," *Inquiries*, 65-75. Davidson argues that such a theory deserves to be called a correspondence theory of truth because the truth of the language (sentence) depends on a 'satisfaction' relationship: "... the property of being true has been explained...in terms of a relation between language and something else."Davidson, "True to the Facts" 48. Letson notes that satisfaction is "a concept that is more general than that of truth, more general in the sense that it has application to sentence parts rather than sentences only. Satisfaction will be that relation that explains how the parts of sentences affect the truth values of sentences." Letson, *Davidson's Theory of Truth* 77. Davidson finds such a theory desirable for three reasons: "the empirical study of language will gain clarity and significance"; the question of whether a theory is correct can be made testable; and the theory called for has powerful "explanatory and predictive power...." Davidson, "Semantics for Natural Languages" 60.

137 "What we must attend to in language, if we want to bring into relief general features of the world, is what it is in general terms for a sentence in the language to be true....If the truth conditions of sentences are placed in the context of a comprehensive theory, the linguistic structure that emerges will reflect the large features of reality." Davidson, "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," *Inquiries*, 201. See also: Ibid., 202-203; Davidson "Truth and Meaning," *Inquiries*, 36; Davidson,"True to the Facts" 51; Davidson, "Semantics for Natural Languages" 61. Davidson states that the truth conditions of a sentence must be given "using only the conceptual resources of that sentence." Davidson, "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," *Inquiries*, 205.

The theory must show us how we can view each of a potential infinity
of sentences as composed from a finite stock of semantically significant
atoms (roughly, words) by means of a finite number of applications of a
finite number of rules of composition. It must then give the truth
conditions of each sentence (relative to the circumstances of its
utterance) on the basis of its composition. The theory may thus be said
to explain the conditions of truth of an utterance of a sentence on the
basis of the roles of the words in the sentence.[138]

On Davidson's view, the meaning of a sentence is composed out of the
meanings of its constituents in accordance with its logical form. Meaning
must take the form of describing truth conditions; explaining the meaning of
a word must take the form of stating the conditions necessary and sufficient
for its application; and giving a correct explanation of a word is a sufficient
condition for using it correctly.[139]

Another indication that Donald Davidson shows a contemptuous attitude
toward the particular case is evident when he identifies how his position
differs from what he incorrectly calls "conceptual relativism". The "dominant
metaphor" of conceptual relativism, he claims is "that of differing points of
view." In Davidson's eyes, there is no description-independent reality, so
different points of view make sense only if there is some general feature
connecting them. The attempt by Thomas Kuhn, for example, to recognize
differences, to describe different "systems of concepts" is simply to buy into a
relativist distinction between language and uninterpreted reality, or scheme
and content, what Davidson calls the 'third dogma of empiricism'. Kuhn's
remark that scientists operating in different scientific traditions "work in
different worlds" is unintelligible and indefensible. As Davidson writes,

---

138 Davidson credits Frege with this view. Davidson "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" 202.

139 In this respect Davidson follows in the footsteps of Frege. See Baker and Hacker, *Analytical*
Commentary Volume 1, 665.

"Since there is only one world these pluralities are metaphorical or merely imagined."[140] By abandoning a "fixed system of concepts (words with fixed meanings)"[141] and by adopting a language of difference, Kuhn gets caught in a paradox of conceptual relativism:

> Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability.[142]

In a similar vein Davidson writes:

> We can make sense of differences all right, but only against a background of shared belief. What is shared does not in general call for comment; it is too dull, trite, or familiar to stand notice. But without a vast common ground, there is no place for disputants to have their quarrel.[143]

In the conclusion to "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", Davidson is disturbed by his discovery that there are particular examples of language use (namely malapropisms) that escape the "standard ideas of language mastery", the "shared beliefs", the "vast common ground", the "common coordinate system" which he thinks are supposed to be essential to understanding language. He remarks that the example of malapropisms reveal that linguistic competence is an ability to understand by "wit, luck and wisdom" and "rules of thumb for figuring our which deviations from the dictionary are most likely."[144] This however is an unacceptable conclusion because it suggests that there is "no learnable common core of consistent behaviour, no shared

---

140 Davidson, "On the Very Idea of A Conceptual Scheme," *Inquiries*, 187.

141 Ibid.

142 Ibid., 184.

143 Davidson, "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" 200.

144 Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," *Truth and Interpretations: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 446.

grammar or rules, no portable interpreting machine set to grind out the meaning of an arbitrary utterance."[145] If these conclusions are true, then it also has to be true that the boundary between "knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally" is erased, "for there are no rules in any strict sense" and so, Davidson dramatically concludes, "there is no such thing as a language". Davidson ends with the claim that unless we identify a "clearly defined shared structure with which language-users acquire and then apply to cases" we should "give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions."[146]

Even critics of Cartesian certainty cannot escape the tendency to generalize. Hence Dunn declares that it is "in a general theory of practical reason, if anywhere, that a well-founded political philosophy must take its stand."[147] And when Alasdair MacIntyre asks "is a science of comparative politics possible?" he replies that while the traditional practice of political science (the formulation of cross-cultural, law-like causal generalizations) is questionable, the formulation of other kinds of generalizations is not: "I do not want to show that there cannot be a general science of political action, but only to indicate certain obstacles that stand in the way of the founding of such a science...."[148]

The current debate then is caught up in an opposition where 'acceptance' of the background form of life means accepting or rejecting the general; or it means a *contempt* for the particular or accepting *its edification*. Hence Rorty claims that the 'background' means the 'reality' against which something is

145 Ibid., 445.

146 Ibid., 446.

147 Dunn, "Rethinking" 182.

148 Alasdair MacIntyre "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" *The Philosophy of Social Explanation*, ed. Alan Ryan (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) 171.

represented or to which something corresponds, or a 'break' between non-linguistic and linguistic interactions or organisms.[149] This leads him to reject the very idea of a framework.

> ...I do not see our dealings with the world as the framework (what Searle calls 'the Background') which makes picturing possible; I do not think that either language or knowledge has anything to do with picturing, representing or corresponding, and so I see formulating and verifying propositions as just a special case of what Taylor calls 'dealing' and I call 'coping'.[150]

Rorty goes on to say that "we cannot draw a line between the object and our picture of the object..." for 'picturing' the object is "just more dealing with it."[151]

Wittgenstein shows us that it is not necessary to accept the terms of this debate. We *can* draw a boundary-line, for a particular purpose, without accepting that the boundary constitutes a break between language and the world, without accepting that a boundary is only fixed and unitary, without accepting that a form of life can only be a determinate and unitary background. The possibility of understanding and critical reflection - to use concepts in customary and novel ways - does not depend on this picture of the background. We can agree with Davidson's observation that our language use is improvisational, that it escapes the boundaries, but this certainly does not entail Davidson's pessimistic conclusions. There are boundaries to speak of even if they are vague or unclear, not systematic or general. As Baker and Hacker advise us, Wittgenstein shows not just that all language is vague and

---

149 Richard Rorty, "Taylor on Truth," *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question,* ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 28.

150 Ibid., 31.

151 Ibid., 32.

indeterminate, "but that we should not deplore this fact."[152] Use is diverse

and indeterminate. No explanation can completely determine use and no

word can be explained so thoroughly that every possible question about its

applicability is settled once and for all. Indeterminacy does not make our

language useless or imperfect. Moreover, Wittgenstein demonstrates that

vagueness is an important characteristic of language and that "far from

making communication impossible, vagueness may be *advantageous.*"[153]

Thus Wittgenstein writes in the *Blue Book*:

> (Elegance is not what we are trying for.) For why should what finite
> and transfinite numbers have in common be more interesting to us
> than what distinguishes them? Or rather, I should not have said "why
> should it be more interesting to us?"—it isn't; and this characterizes
> our way of thinking.[154]

So in *The Blue Book* Wittgenstein tells us that thinking that the background

is a finite, comprehensive or essential set of rules or a determining context is

a contemptuous attitude toward the less general concrete particular cases, a

craving toward the more general, for a sharp boundary or definition.

Wittgenstein does not rule-out the idea of drawing a boundary: "you are free

to draw it as you like" he writes, as long as we understand that "this boundary

will never coincide with actual usage, as this usage has no sharp

boundary."[155] As James Tully writes, of course we can always construct a

theory or a generalization if we wish, "as long as we remember that it serves

the limited and heuristic purpose of throwing light on a small number of

152 Baker and Hacker, *Analytical Commentary Volume 1,* 373.
153 Ibid., 372, 373, 367.
154 Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book* 19.
155 Ibid.

features of the phenomenon at the expense of obscuring all others."[156]

That is not to say that in talking about change, one does not also hold some things constant. In fact the background, our conventions and practices, are not candidates for, in Dunn's words, "drastic and systematic reconstitution."[157] But it is the 'constancy' and determinacy which has been over-emphasized by these commentators in describing forms of life. In so doing, they have characterized Wittgenstein's account of reason and understanding in terms he adamantly rejected. Understanding is not the monological activity of being trained into a set of implicit rules, or imposing an authoritative explanation on someone who does not understand. The meaning of a particular utterance is not determined by a rule nor is it determined by the checks and tests on my conformity to the rule provided by my linguistic community. Words have meaning in "the flow of life", in the flow of conversation within what Stern describes as "the stream of conversation, our ordinary use of language."[158] As Wittgenstein writes, "...you must look at the practice of language [die Praxis der Sprache] , then you will see it. "[159]

It is this dialogical aspect of Wittgenstein's position that has been neglected by those seeking to disclose Wittgenstein's positive implications for social and political philosophy. What these accounts miss is that Wittgenstein's position is in fact far more democratic than the patronizing, benignly despotic interpretation so prevalent in the literature; understanding is a gamut of social practices, such as giving reasons and critically evaluating alternatives;

156 Tully, "Progress and Scepticism" 276.

157 Dunn, "Rethinking" 174.

158 Wittgenstein *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, I §913, Quoted in Stern, *Mind and Language* 189.

159 Wittgenstein *On Certainty*, trans. Dennis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. Von Wright (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) section 501, quoted in Stern, *Mind and Language*, 190.

such as mediating rival views; such as seeking mutual reconciliation and agreement with others who see things differently, who have different 'ways of seeing things'. The monological account is too limited to explain the central practices of 'understanding' such as exchanging reasons in discussions in politics or in the humanities and social sciences. Yet this is what has to be accounted for.

The point I am making is that there are ways of speaking about forms of life and the background in non-monological, indeterminate and plural terms. \ form of life is characterized by what Stern calls "change and persistence." It is characterized by the undifferentiated connection between an indeterminate background - the 'flow of life', the fleeting, evanescent, ungraspable, transitory character of the human condition and the conventional and critical foreground - the positive role for language - the way language help us see things by bringing aspects of this background into the foreground.[160]

This combination of change and persistence, convention and flow, "the true role that flux and stability do play in our lives"[161] and the variety of ways we 'frame' our understanding is missed when an emphasis is placed on understanding as 'obeying a rule' or emphasizing the authority of context-dependent or rule-governed activities. The argument for the unitary and determinate background must therefore be seen as deeply mistaken.

160 Stern, *Mind and Language* 190,174, 186.
161 Ibid., 174.

CHAPTER II

'The background':
Indeterminacy, Circumscription and Comparative-Dialogue

I.   Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that the familiar relativist and politically conservative interpretations of Wittgenstein's later philosophy are deeply mistaken, that they are based on a picture of philosophy that Wittgenstein expressly rejected. Describing the background, our forms of life, in unitary and in rule- and context-determinate ways is an example of what Wittgenstein calls a craving for generality and a contemptuous attitude toward the particular case.

In this chapter, I want to draw out this argument by explaining why this craving distorts rather than helps us understand the concept of a 'background': how the indeterminate practices that is our background are connected in an undifferentiated way to our various attempts to circumscribe them. Describing the background in unitary and in rule- and context-determinate ways neglects the undefined and multifarious nature of the background, and does not get us nearer to explaining the ways that some aspects of the variety can be brought into view, or represented, for specific purposes. On the other hand, holding up 'continuing conversation' and creative contestation as edifying ends in themselves is equally distortive, because it ignores the fact that these practices are part of, not separate from, the constant struggle to articulate, to frame, to ground and bring into view aspects of our indeterminate practices, the labyrinth of human experiences. On this view our background forms of life are neither wholly contingent nor completely determined or fixed but rather active and flexible, the praxis of language in all its complexity. Furthermore, on this view we critically reflect on different ways of seeing things in the persuasive activity of *comparison.*

This view is 'dialogical' because it takes differences seriously. Differences in the meanings of concepts are not dismissed as metaphorical or merely imagined, but are considered to be alternative attempts at describing the background forms of life, and therefore as alternative ways of seeing things, and grasping the truth. This view assumes that understanding and critical evaluation is not done on the basis of a fixed or determinate set of rules nor by an imposed or authoritative practice but by comparing similarities and differences among the various examples of a concept, by making a place in our ontology for something like 'another way of seeing things'; it insists that we reason and understand (evaluate alternative beliefs, customs, practices and institutions) always in comparison: in conversation with, sometimes in struggle against, others with different and equally justified positions; it assumes that there are different ways of understanding in contrast to 'our way of seeing things'; it argues that the language of explanation must therefore include or make use of a range of evaluative descriptions that the other would have used to describe and classify her own actions; it avoids dismissing the other 'way of seeing things' as mere madness; it refrains from interpreting differences of behaviour as mere error.

This view agrees with Rorty's observation that Wittgenstein's later work was a therapy against "the construction of a permanent, neutral framework for inquiry, and thus for all culture."[1] And it agrees with Dunn's insistence that political philosophy cannot leave the world exactly as it is. But, it does not conclude, as Dunn does, that we must found political philosophy on a 'general theory' of our practices, or that our only options are either accepting our practices or drastically and systematically reconstituting them. And it does not conclude, as Rorty does, that Wittgenstein's therapy against the fixed

---

1 Rorty, *Mirror of Nature* 8.

foundation is his only legacy. Wittgenstein's position was indeed directed against traditional epistemology and its quest for a general or comprehensive theory, a culturally or historically invariant explanation to ground understanding. But his position is not only reactive, it does more than "send the conversation off in all new directions"[2]; it also defends the idea that there are many possible foundations.[3] This dissertation will survey a variety of Wittgensteinian alternatives to this epistemological tradition, the alternative ways in which Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian philosophy has been used to evaluate and critically assess a variety of social and political practices or forms of life. In so doing, it will illustrate that Wittgenstein shows the fly many possible ways out of the epistemological fly-bottle; how critically reflecting on our indeterminate practices is possible by appealing neither to a necessary and sufficient set of rules nor a sharply demarcated determining background.

It is this dialogical connection between convention and innovation, custom and its creative contestation, 'obeying a rule' and 'going against it', and not the relativist-conservative image frequently portrayed, that runs throughout Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian writings and is perhaps his most important insight. Ultimately if there are clear positive social and political implications of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, they stem from this comparative and dialogical philosophical position.

In order to defend my thesis that Wittgenstein is neither relativist nor conservative, I shall turn to examples of the application of this 'comparative-dialogical' Wittgensteinian approach in contemporary social and political philosophy. This use of Wittgenstein is evident in the works of Charles

---

2 Ibid., 378.

3 "I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as in having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, ed. G.H. Von Wright (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977) 7e.

Taylor, Quentin Skinner and Thomas Kuhn.[4] In so doing I intend to correct the prevailing and misleading sense of what can and cannot be said and done with Wittgenstein's concepts of 'rule-following' and 'form of life', by surveying the variety of things have been said and done with these concepts by these contemporary philosophers.

Following Skinner, I propose this route, rather than a uniquely textual or conceptual analysis alone because it is apt to seem much less convincing to suggest that Wittgenstein's concepts *might* be coherently used in unfamiliar ways than to show that they *have* been put to these unfamiliar but coherent uses.[5] Therefore I propose to turn not to a Wittgensteinian *ideal* but to *examples* of the 'comparative-dialogical' uses of Wittgenstein as 'objects of comparison' as a means of calling into question the current beliefs about understanding and critical reflection and to show, quite contrary to the relativist-conservative Wittgensteinians, that Wittgenstein is not promoting the idea of an anti-realist or context-dependent rationality, or an incomparable communitarian human understanding, or a neutralist, nonrevisionary, relativist, apolitical, psychoanalytic, uncritical or private social and political philosophy. In so doing I am following Wittgenstein's insight in section 208 of the *Philosophical Investigations* :

> Then am I defining "order" and "rule" by means of

---

4 I include Kuhn's philosophy of the sciences in the category of 'social' theory because as he himself states, "a paradigm governs, in the first instance, not a subject matter but rather a group of practitioners" and "any study of paradigm-directed or of paradigm-shattering research must begin by locating the responsible group or groups." Furthermore, "scientific knowledge, like language, is intrinsically the common property of a group or nothing else at all. To understand it we shall need to know the special characteristics of the groups that create and use it." T.L. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Second Edition Enlarged*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970) 180, 210.

5 Quentin Skinner, "The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives," *Philosophy in History*, ed. R. Rorty, J. Schneewind and Q. Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 198.

"regularity"?—How do I explain the meaning of "regular", "uniform", "same" to anyone?—I shall explain these words to someone who, say, only speaks French words. But if a person has not yet got the *concepts*, I shall teach him to use the words by means of *examples* and by *practice*.—And when I do this, I do not communicate less to him than I know myself.

Thus it will be in a survey of various uses and applications of Wittgenstein's comparative-dialogical techniques that I will show that I and others understand them.

II.   Wittgenstein's Post-Tractarian Philosophy

The Game, Not the Rules of the Game

In the previous chapter I explained that Wittgenstein expressly rejects the idea of a unitary and determinate background because like a collection of games, our practices are variegated, eclectic and flexible in a way that resists being captured by a set of rules and there is no sharp boundary between the 'background' (the actual play of the game, our human experiences or practices) and the languages our practices constitute. The 'language-games' argument highlights what Wittgenstein considered a number of crucial features of human understanding: we understand the meaning of a word in the practical sense by actually using it, by being educated or "trained to its use"[6] by "obeying a rule"[7], participating in the ongoing practice, the agreed-to[8], regular or customary use of language. But the flip-side of this coin is that we understand the meaning of a word by modifying and contesting a word-rule by "'going against it' in actual cases," by going against that training, rule-following, agreement and custom, by making "detours" and going by

6 *The Blue and Brown Books* 77 and *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, sections 5, 6, 27, 30-33.

7 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, section 201.

8 For Wittgenstein "the word 'agreement' and the word 'rule' are related to one another, they are cousins...." Ibid., Part I, section 225.

"sideroads" in the actual use of expressions, taking the "multitude of familiar paths" that lead off from familiar words "in every direction"[9], using the language in new and innovative ways, acquiring the range of normative abilities to use a concept in various contexts.

The 'language-game' argument is also used to show that one cannot understand a sign - 'follow a rule' - privately. Human understanding cannot occur monologically, Wittgenstein argues. Understanding cannot be reduced to an 'inner process', where language functions merely as a conveyor of thoughts, about pains, good and evil, colour or objects. Understanding how to play a game (to follow a rule) is not just an ongoing customary practice, it is also a social practice. It is not something that one person could do, and so "to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule."[10]

The game metaphor illustrates that language is constantly flowing and indeterminate, and that it is not merely a description of human activity but something inextricably interwoven in human actions and values. As he puts it in *Investigations* section 546, "words are also deeds". Like a collection of games, it is a mistake to look for the comprehensive, common, general or essential features that unites the variety of language, independently of any future experience, or to look for the set of necessary and sufficient conditions that capture the variety of use - not because the rules of a game are implicit or normative, rather than explicit and factual, but because our forms of life, (our

---

9 Ibid., Part I, sections 201, 426, 525.

10 Ibid., Part I, sections 202, 199, 204-208. Backer and Hacker have suggested that "what is understood by speakers of the same language is a shared, common, public meaning. There are no such thing as ineffable meanings, nor is understanding a concealed inner mechanism." Baker and Hacker, *Analytical Commentary Volume 1*, 83. Furthermore the meaning of a word must be "public and sharable". P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytical Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 244. My reading is slightly different from this one since I am arguing that a non-private and non-monological understanding is not necessarily "sharable" and "common" but comparable and analogical.

customary practices or language-games) are so diverse and indeterminate and so any explicit formulation will be no more than an approximation to the ways of acting in which the formulation is embedded.[11] Instead language must be seen as multifarious: a multiplicity of tools with different functions; an ancient city with a maze of little streets and squares, old and new houses and multitude of neighbourhoods; the overlapping of many fibres; a labyrinth of paths; a family of games (card-games, board-games like chess, ball-games like tennis);[12] a motley of ongoing customary social practices and institutions.[13] What these analogies point to is that what unites the variety of our practices is not one common element or a set of common properties but, Wittgenstein reminds us in the *Investigations* section 66, the family resemblances of this variety, "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."

The Example Not the Rule - 'Let Use Teach You Meaning'

This is a celebrated aspect of Wittgenstein's whole post-Tractarian outlook. But the point of the analogy to games and of the concept of 'family resemblance' is missed by the relativist and conservative Wittgensteinians, the rule- and context-determinists. The point that is missed by these commentators is that in language as in various games, what we call 'rules' do not capture our practices because games are "not everywhere circumscribed by rules" so the use of a word *may not be* governed by clearly specified rules, or indeed by any 'rules' at all. Sometimes we play following definite rules, sometimes we make up the rules as we go along and sometimes we alter them as we play.[14] Even though "the extension of a concept is *not* closed by a

11 Stern, *Meaning and Mind* 190.
12 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, sections 11-12, 18, 19, 23, 67, 203.
13 Ibid., Part I, sections 198-99, 202, 205, 337.
14 Ibid., Part I, section 83.

frontier" and "the application of a word is not everywhere bounded by rules" and there is "vagueness in the rules"[15] this neither prevents us from using the concept to describe the activity, nor is the concept and the practices it describes unregulated,[16] nor is it an indication that 'anything goes'.

The important point is that absence of an explicit or unifying set of rules is not a limitation, something that needs to be corrected. On the contrary it is this very vagueness that explains what language is, as Wittgenstein explains in section 71 of the *Investigations*:

> One might say that the concept 'game' is a concept with blurred edges.— "But is a blurred concept a concept at all?"—Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need? Frege compares a concept to an area and says that an area with vague boundaries cannot be called an area at all. This presumably means that we cannot do anything with it.—But is it senseless to say: "Stand roughly there"?[17] Suppose that I were standing with someone in a city square and said that. As I say it I do not draw any kind of boundary, but perhaps point with my hand—as if I were indicating a particular *spot*. And this is just how one might explain what a game is. One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way.—I do not, however, mean by this that he is supposed to see in those examples that common thing which I—for some reason—was unable to express; but that he is now to employ those examples in a particular way. Here giving examples is not an *indirect* means of explaining—in default of a better. For any general definition can be misunderstood too. The point is that this is how we play the game. (I mean the language-game with the word "game".)

The analogy of games and language helps to illustrate that our concepts have

---

15 Ibid., Part I, 68, 70, 84, 100.

16 Ibid., Part I, 100. As he writes in the *Philosophical Investigations*, section 68 "no more are there any rules for how high one throws the ball in tennis, or how hard; yet tennis is a game for all that and has rules too."

17 Cf *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, section 88.

no fixed meanings, no unequivocal uses in all possible cases, no calculus of definite rules.[18] But the absence of rules does not make a game un-learnable: because the 'rules' of a game cannot completely capture the play and are embedded in the conventional activity of the game itself, we learn how to play though the inarticulate assumptions of the game acquired from our ongoing mutual participation in the game itself. What is taken for granted limits what we do, but that also grounds our understanding and judgement, allows us to distinguish between correct and incorrect play. So we learn how to play a game like chess or tennis, and use a rule or sign, by example and by practice, through our ongoing participation in the game, or the practice in which a rule or sign is customarily used.[19] In this way a game "can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules", by "watching how others play."[20] This is the force behind Wittgenstein's claim in the *Philosophical Investigations*, section 219 that "When I obey a rule... I obey the rule blindly" and his claim in section 211 that a rule is not followed because I have good reasons or justifications. Since rule-following is based on practice, what is taken for granted, a conventional understanding, "my reasons will soon give out. And then I will act without reasons."

Wittgenstein is not suggesting here that reasons can never be given, nor does he reject providing definitions, interpretations, or common meanings; the point is that, with conventional understanding, giving reasons, definitions, interpretations and finding things in common are not needed to make a concept understandable or learnable. We know how to follow a sign or a rule not because it comes with its own instructions, or because of the instructions

---

18 Ibid., Part I, 79, 81.

19 "One can discern that the game is played according to such and such rules because an observer can read these rules off from the practice of the game - like a natural law governing the play."Ibid., Part I, section 54.

20 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, section 94 and *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, section 54.

of another sign, but because of custom and practice in the use of that sign. Of course sometimes a sign or a rule does need another one (like a crutch) but only in specific cases, for example to clear-up a misunderstanding.

> Whereas an explanation may indeed rest on another one that has been given, but none stands in need of another—unless *w e* require it to prevent a misunderstanding. One might say: an explanation serves to remove or to avert a misunderstanding—one, that is that would occur but for the explanation; not every one that I can imagine....[21]

Every sentence in a customarily used language-game is understood, it is "in order as it is."[22] It is only when we believe that we must find the determinate rule-bound order in language, Wittgenstein tells us, when we believe that we must find the ideal in our actual language that we "become dissatisfied with what are ordinarily called "propositions", "words", "signs".[23] Wittgenstein urges us to stop "*striving after* an ideal, as if our ordinary vague sentences had not yet got a quite unexceptional sense, and a perfect language awaited construction by us...."[24] As he succinctly states in section 87, "[the] sign-post is in order—if, under normal circumstances, it fulfils its purpose."

Finding what is common and 'giving definitions', are themselves practices or language-games. These practices have their place, but they are particular practices, not the essence of language activity.[25] It is a mistake to reduce the complex variety of language activity according to the demands of these practices or language-games. It is a mistake to assume that concepts are only

---

21 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, sections 85, 87

22 Ibid., Part I, 98.

23 Ibid., Part I, 104.

24 Ibid., Part I, 98.

25 "If... you wish to give a definition...i.e. to draw a sharp boundary, then you are free to draw it as you like; and this boundary will never entirely coincide with the actual usage, as this usage has no boundary." The Blue and Brown Books 19.

meaningful or understood when justified, defined, reified, generalized and when the multiplicity of uses of words are reduced to a single common denominator.[26] In the end it is not a rule or a context that 'determines' meaning, rather "...it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of a language-game."[27]

This is an important argument: one of the things that the comparative-dialogical Wittgensteinians recognize, contrary to Donald Davidson's pessimistic conclusions in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", is that 'having no rules' does not entail 'having no conventions' or no language. Instead they recognize that improvisation is a normal part of the complexity of language-use and mutual understanding. It is not a sign of failure that we understand by what Davidson pejoratively calls "wit, luck and wisdom". Because language-use is rooted in practice and not in a formula, giving examples and analogies is all one can really do. As Wittgenstein explains in section 209 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, there is no deeper explanation nor does our understanding reach beyond all the particular examples of language use. A global, unitary or over-arching formula, principle or interpretation, is neither possible nor is it required to ground critical reflection and human understanding. To understand a concept is to know how to use it in a variety of customary and novel ways and to 'see the connections' between the variety of uses. This understanding does not take the form of seeing what the variety of uses have in common, but seeing things compared to your own 'way of seeing things', seeing how other parts of the city are connected to the suburb in which you live. This 'comparative' and analogical nature of understanding and judgement is what Wittgenstein

---

26 "To repeat, we can draw a boundary—for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose.)" *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, section 69.
27 *On Certainty*, section 204.

means by 'perspicuous representation', what he means when he tells us in section 208 of the *Investigations* , "I shall teach...by means of examples and by practice..." This is what Taylor, Kuhn and Skinner have in common in their comparative-dialogical Wittgensteinianism: what Thomas Kuhn is pointing to with his concept of a 'scientific paradigm', what Charles Taylor means by a 'language of perspicuous contrast' and what Quentin Skinner is employing in his histories of the ideologies (vocabularies) of modern political thought.

"The Background is the Bustle of Life"

So, the first aspect that is missed by the relativist-conservative Wittgensteinians is that the indeterminacy of our background form of life consists in a flexibility that resists being captured by any set of rules or necessary and sufficient conditions.[28] Rather the background, our forms of life, have to be understood as a collection of social practices, customary activities, abilities and accompaniments. Wittgenstein's examples of signposts not by themselves telling us what to do are meant to illustrate this first point. And the dialogical Wittgensteinians acknowledge this rule-indeterminacy by using the term 'convention', 'use', 'practice' (and in Kuhn's case the homologous Wittgensteinian term 'paradigm') rather than 'rule'.

As David Stern so lucidly explains, even when Wittgensteinians accept this first point, there is a tendency to think of the background conventions as some specific thing to be referred to with a definite article, the ('capital-B') Background, something like the scenery on a stage that makes it possible for actions on that stage to have the significance that they do, something that stands behind the use of words and our actions and giving them the meaning and coherence that they have, the "regress stopper at the end of a search for

---

28 Stern, *Mind and Language* 190.

the basis for what we ordinarily take for granted."[29] But, late in life, Wittgenstein came to see that this is a mistake. Our 'practices' are indeterminate in the sense that they cannot be spelled out in terms of rules but also in the sense that there is not a sharp distinction between background and foreground: the borderline between empirical and methodological judgements, for example, "is not sharply demarcated, and will change over time."[30]

Understanding that language is like a game is recognizing that it is like mastering a technique, it is an ability, which means recognizing that there is not a sharply demarcated background "against which a particular sentence acquires meaning." As Wittgenstein states "...In our study of symbolism there is no foreground and background; it isn't a matter of a tangible sign with an accompanying intangible power or understanding."[31]

Wittgenstein teaches us about this indeterminacy and vagueness of the background (in the sense that it cannot be spelled out in terms of rules and in the sense that there is not a sharp distinction between background and foreground) by means of a number of analogies: a river-bank and the foundations of a house, for example, in On Certainty, and "the bustle of life" in the Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology. These analogies help to illustrate the undifferentiated connection between convention and creative contestation, change and persistence, what is questioned and what is taken for granted, why questioning a given form of life involves the acceptance of others and not a transcendental standpoint.[32]

---

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Wittgenstein *Philosophical Grammar*, 12, 43. Quoted in Stern, *Mind and Language*, 191.

32 As Tully has observed in numerous articles including "Progress" 276.

In *On Certainty*,[33] sections 94-99, Wittgenstein explains the concept of a form of life by comparison with a river-bed:

> It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, on that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

> The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters of the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.

> And the bank of the river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited.[34]

The relation between what is taken for granted ("my picture of the world") and what is questioned is compared with the relation of hardened and fluid channels of a river-bed, a relation that "altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid." While we distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself, "there is not a sharp division of the one from the other." Furthermore, the bank of that river consists "partly of hard rock", (what is taken for granted), "which alters imperceptibly", and "partly of sand" (what is questioned), which "gets washed away, or deposited."[35] Like the river and the river-bed, we get our "picture of the world" (that is we understand it) not by satisfying ourselves of its correctness, not by testing all its basic assumptions, nor by radically doubting everything about it. Instead our practices of critical reflection take place within a collection of unquestioned forms of life.

---

33 Written between the middle of 1949 and April 29, 1951 two days before his death.
34 On Certainty, sections 96, 97, 99.
35 Ibid.

Wittgenstein writes: "[all] testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system" and "the system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life."[36] The "bottom of the language-game", that is, the foundation of our knowledge and well-founded belief, is not apodictic certainty but our uncircumscribed, untested, bustling, multifarious practices. This is what Wittgenstein describes as "an ungrounded way of acting", an "accustomed context" and unfounded belief.[37] And this is contrary to Jonathan Lear's misleading interpretation, the meaning behind Wittgenstein's claim in the *Investigations* section 124 that philosophy "leaves everything as it is."

This is not a crudely reductionist or materialist conception of language-games, the background, or forms of life where human relations, the multitude of social practices, simply determine various superstructures of language, ideology and consciousness. Language is inseparable, in the sense of being woven into, human activity and a form of life and not simply derivative of it. Language *is* social practice. Words are *also* deeds. The base, the "rock-bottom", the foundation of human understanding, is held in place by ongoing language use. In Wittgenstein's words, "one might say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house."[38] The foundation is not just 'fixed' by the activity itself, but one could say the activity (praxis) is the foundation of understanding, the 'productive force', to borrow a phrase from Marx. The relationship of language-use to our form of life is like the river and the river-bed: the "hard rock" of the river- bank "alters imperceptibly", and its sand,"gets washed away, or deposited."[39] As the river is to the river-bed, as the foundation-walls are to the foundation, as a tested hypothesis is to

---

36 Ibid., section 105.
37 Ibid., sections 110, 237, 253.
38 Ibid., section 248.
39 Ibid., section 99.

the system in which it is tested, so too is language to the game, the word to the deed.These and innumerable other examples are employed to illustrate the undifferentiated relationship between thinking and acting, language-use and convention, a rule and its correct enactment, theory and practice.

Wittgenstein puts this best in *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* where he writes:

> We judge an action according to this background within human life, and this background is not monochrome, but we might picture it as a very complicated filigree pattern, which, to be sure, we can't copy, but which we can recognize from the general impression it makes.
>
> The background is the bustle of life. And our concepts point to something within *this* bustle.
>
> And it is the very concept of "bustle" that brings about this indefiniteness. For a bustle only comes about through constant repetition. And there is no definite starting point for "constant repetition."...
>
> How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. Not what *o n e* person is doing *n o w*, but the whole hurly-burly is the background against which see an action, and it determines our judgement, our concepts and our reactions.[40]

What Wittgenstein means by these remarks is that the background is not something apart from or prior to our lives. It is the activities of our lives themselves: the praxis of language in all its complexity, as Stern observes. And so the attempt to reduce this complexity to rules or a determining context, the attempt to generate a unitary and determinate background, is simply to circumscribe use and so disregard, refuse to admit, or dismiss

---

40 *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, II, sections 624-626, 629 and /ettel, 567. Quoted in Stern, *Mind and Language* 191-192.

human activity, its creativity and indeterminacy. It is in *this* sense of indeterminacy (and not in the relativist conception) that we must understand Wittgenstein's claim that philosophy may neither explain nor deduce anything, since everything lies open to view, and that philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language, nor give it any foundation. The sheer variety of our background practices (forms of life, customary activities) means that attempts to define our forms of life are limited: philosophy in this sense "neither explains nor deduces anything" we are told in *Investigations* section 126. Our forms of life cannot be captured and explained once and for all; they are "the given" and "what has to be accepted."[41] Our customary rule-following activities are not grounded in regress-stopping justifications or reasons but, on the contrary, the justifications and reasons are ways of circumscribing that variety of customary practices. And so, as Wittgenstein tells us in the *Investigations* sections 211 and 217 eventually the reasons and justifications will be exhausted, and then we will act without reasons and be inclined to say "this is simply what I do."

II. Understanding Conflicting Forms of Life

'Persuasion' or 'Comparison'? And Is There a 'Fact of the Matter'?

So far, I have argued that our practices are indeterminate and that it is our craving for generality that creates this tendency to rule- and context-determinacy. Given that our practices resist being captured by any set of rules or necessary and sufficient conditions and that the borderline between the empirical and the methodological is neither a fixed foundation nor sharply demarcated and will change over time, how do we critically evaluate or distinguish conflicting claims to truth? In other words, once we abandon the unitary and determinate background, then we need another language or way

---

41 *Philosophical Investigations* Part II, xi, 226e.

of explaining how we can (depending on the purpose and specific occasion) mediate, arbitrate, reconcile or resolve conflicting 'rationalities', disputes over 'ways of seeing things', rival claims to truth or uncombinable forms of life. Our challenge is to find a language of cross-cultural understanding that can be spelled out neither as a set of necessary and sufficient rules nor a fixed foundation or regress-stopper.

As I argued earlier, Rorty and Davidson reject the idea that we can sort out our propositions by whether they are 'made' true by the 'world' (the 'facts') or 'by us'; there is no way to decide which descriptions of an object get at what is 'intrinsic to it' (the features which a thing has independently of how we describe it), as opposed to it merely 'relational', extrinsic features (its description-relative features). There is no way to decide which is the world or the 'thing' in itself and the world for us. To say that we cannot make these distinctions is to say that we should drop altogether the 'third dogma of empiricism', the distinction between scheme and content, and that means abandoning the very idea of a background.[42] This is a heady proposition but how does abandoning the distinction between scheme and content solve the problem of mediating or arbitrating conflict?

Davidson's correspondence theory of truth rests on an outright denial of the very sources of conflict: he dismisses conceptual pluralism as "metaphorical or merely imagined."[43] For Davidson, there is no description-independent manner in which we can speak of a 'truth of the matter' or 'fact of the matter', so truth in this sense has no role in the arbitration of disputes because there are not disputes for an independent truth to arbitrate. This is not to say that 'truth' has no role whatsoever. If there is no description-independent way the

---

42 See Rorty, "Taylor on Truth," 22-23.
43 Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," 187.

world is, then what is rational is not that which corresponds to the facts, or a description-independent truth, but that which can be translated according to a fixed formal system, a set of generally applicable rules that can be mapped onto people's behaviour, a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for meaning. As Rorty says, to abandon the concept of a background is only to abandon 'representational' independence (description-independence) not causal independence.[44] It doesn't mean, in other words, abandoning the search for the necessary and sufficient conditions that give meaning; and that explains Davidson's insistence that speech "is related in a certain conventional way to something in the world exclusive of itself" and hence his project of finding a correspondence theory of truth for a particular used language.[45] In other words, Davidson's position offers a language of understanding that does not rest on a conception of capital-B Background, but one that nevertheless relies on a unitary and determining set of rules. I have already explained, following Wittgenstein, why such rule-determinacy is so problematic, and so it cannot serve as our language of understanding.

Rorty's Inference

Rorty's naturalist explanation recognizes pluralism, thus avoiding the pitfalls of Davidson's denial, but proposes a language of understanding that can be described as a kind of 'dialogical darwinism'.[46] Like Davidson, Rorty claims

---

44 Rorty, "Taylor on Truth," 22.

45 "We can get away from what seems to be talk of the (absolute) truth of timeless statements if we accept truth as relativized to occasions of speech...." Davidson, "True to the Facts," 53. Davidson goes on to state that his correspondence theory is an elaboration of Austin's view that "to say a statement is true is to say that a certain speech-episode is related in a certain conventional way to something in the world exclusive of itself." Ibid, 53-54.

46 Rorty defines naturalism as "the claim that there is no occupant of space-time that is not linked in a single web of causal relations to all other occupants; and that the explanation of the behaviour of any spatio-temporal object must consist in placing that object within that single web." Ibid., 30. In a recently-published symposium Rorty describes his view as follows: "Pragmatism starts out from Darwinian naturalism - from a picture of human beings as chance products of evolution." Richard Rorty "Remarks on

that if there is no description-independent way the world is[47] then what is rational is not what corresponds to the facts; unlike Davidson, he claims that what is rational is what wins by 'persuasion'. Traditional epistemological concepts like 'corresponding ' and 'representing' do not "have anything to do with the distinction between rational arbitrament and alternative ways of settling disputes." That distinction, he goes on to say, is explained "by the distinction between 'persuasion and force'." As he writes, "I think all instances of persuasion, of oneself or of others, as equally cases of 'the arbitration of reason'." From this, Rorty makes the following inference: "Because no proposition is 'made' true by anything, and since no sentence is a representation of anything, all candidates for truth are on par with respect of relation to an independent reality."[48] In other words,

> debates about astrophysics, how to read Rilke...which movie to go to, and what kind of ice cream tastes best, are, in this respect, on a par. There is no point to asking in which of these cases there is a 'fact of the matter' or a 'truth of the matter', though there may be a point in asking whether any useful purpose is served by spending much time debating the matter.[49]

Rorty's position is that among rival practices or conflicting uses of concepts, what prevails, the correct application of a concept, (the conventional meaning and its customary use), are decided either by instances of persuasion[50], in which case the arbitration of differences is rational, or instances of violence and force, in which case it lacks rationality.

Deconstruction and Pragmatism," *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 15.

47 Rorty, "Taylor on Truth" 26.
48 Ibid., 28, (footnote 14).
49 Ibid., 29.
50 Including, for example, parliamentary or academic debate. Ibid., 29, footnote 16.

Rorty's position offers a language of understanding that is not rule-determined, and which does not rest on a conception of capital-B Background and so, at first glance appears to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. But it does so by abandoning altogether the notion of truth: the views that are decided by the outcome either of 'persuasion' or by 'force' are unrelated to what is true or valid in relation to the people who are engaged in practices of persuasion. In either case (persuasion or force) what is true or valid for those persuading or forcing does not impinge on meaning.

Therefore, abandoning the scheme/content distinction (the background) at first glance seems promising, but it does not get us closer to our goal of cross-cultural understanding. By accepting the radical equality of all truth-claims we are left with no language to mediate, adjudicate or reconcile them. And so we are at an impasse not unlike that described earlier: either we find a comprehensive theory to unite conflicting claims, or we must accept the incorrigibility of each of these claims. In Davidson and Rorty we find examples of both sides of this disjunction: the former searching for a formal and unitary theory of truth that can be applied to particular used languages; the latter abandoning the concept of truth altogether in favour of 'edification' and the radical incomparability of all forms of life. The dialogical Wittgensteinians offer a way out of the impasse, and it is based on Wittgenstein's concept of a 'perspicuous representation'.

Die übersichtliche Darstellung

Wittgenstein's way of weaning us from the from the craving for a general theory of language, a comprehensive account of how language works, or an explanation that sets forth the essential features of language, is summed up in the concept of 'Übersichtlichkeit', and 'die übersichtliche Darstellung' commonly translated as 'survey', 'perspicuity' and 'perspicuous

representation'.[51] Gordon Baker has argued that the most direct route to attaining an overview of Wittgenstein's method is to address the question of what he meant by this concept.[52] Indeed, the *Investigations* section 122 where it is introduced, Wittgenstein himself states that the concept of a perspicuous representation "is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things...." According to Baker, Wittgenstein uses the concept to explain two aspects of language: the use of words (or what Wittgenstein calls their 'grammar'), and a second order concern with different forms of representation (the way we look at things). When our grammar has perspicuity, it means we abandon our contemptuous attitude toward the particular cases, to the multiplicity of uses of our words, the different ways of looking at the uses of our words.[53] To have a 'perspicuous representation' is to "*command a clear view* of the use of our words" and this is an understanding which consists in "seeing connections" among the variety of language-games and particular examples of use rather than creating general theories and applying these to the examples and cases.

A main source of our failure to understand (when "our grammar is lacking in...perspicuity") occurs when we do not command a clear view of the irreducible plurality of uses of our words, when we are held captive by a 'picture', and we cannot get outside it "for it lay in our language and language

51 The concept first appears in Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* ed. Rush Rhees (Brynmill, 1979) 8-9 and again in *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, section 122. In addition to section 122, Wittgenstein raises the concept of 'perspicuous representation' in *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, sections 89-92. The precursor of 122 is a remark in an earlier version of the *Philosophical Investigations* - the *TS 220*, sections 98- 100. See Gordon Baker, "*Philosophical Investigations* Section 122: Neglected Aspects," *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, ed. Robert L. Arrington and Hans-Johan Glock (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 44 and Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1990) 310-311.

52 For an excellent synopsis of the debate around the concept, see Baker, "Section 122 " 35-68.

53 See Ibid., 52-53. Baker argues that it is this 'second-order' concern with different forms of representation of grammar which is distinctive of what Wittgenstein called his method.

[seems] to repeat it to us inexorably".[54] A picture holds us captive when, in Taylor's words, it "[sinks] to a level of unquestionable background assumption", when it organizes and makes sense of so much of our lives that it appears unchallengeable and hard to conceive alternatives to.[55] In such cases where we are unable to conceive of any other way of looking at the world, we are 'aspect-blind', unaware of the possible variety of aspects of words (the variety of uses and therefore the variety of meanings) of language and of our practices. When we are held captive by a picture of the world, it is an "unshakeable ideal", an insight into the very essence of phenomenon, rather than one picture among many. "It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off." That is, "[we] predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it."[56]

The method of perspicuous representation is a goal and a strategy for achieving this goal; it is both a process and a what Wittgenstein calls "the way we look at things", a way of understanding and acting in the world. To have perspicuity is to have a comparative understanding, an awareness that there may be various possibilities and different aspects; to have a comparative understanding is to have clarity. Its purpose is to effect not just a change in opinion, interpretation, or to make us 'see as', (to see some familiar object *as* something or take what we know *as* something). The goal of perspicuous representation is to have a comparative analogical understanding: to free us from 'aspect-blindness'- from deeply held ways of thinking - and to expose the variety of ways of seeing a matter at hand; to 'see connections' among the similarities and differences in the irreducible plurality of human practices; to

---

54 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, section 115.
55 Charles Taylor, "Philosophy and Its History," *Philosophy in History* ed. Rorty et. al., 20-21.
56 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, sections 103, 104.

"regard a given case differently"[57]; to see the variety of concepts or language-games, and the variety of aspects about them. Perspicuity means freedom from the craving for generality and contempt for the particular case, from deeply held self-understandings; perspicuity also means having a clearer self-understanding of the assumptions underlying our practices, by bringing aspects out into the open.

These goals of perspicuous representation are achieved by means of the 'survey', which is a technique of bringing hitherto unnoticed aspects of phenomena to someone's awareness. The survey is a technique of "assembling reminders for a particular purpose"[58] of "substituting one form of expression for another"[59], of using 'intermediate cases'[60] and 'objects of comparison'.[61] The survey then, can be used to free us from the captivity of one language-game (a picture holding us captive)[62] or it might help restore to prominence a neglected or forgotten language-game. The survey is not a 'bird's-eye-view'; it is not like someone looking down on a city from a height thereby commanding a clear view of the streets and neighbourhoods below; it is not a view from nowhere. In a draft of his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein described the concept of 'perspicuous representation' as follows:

> We then change the aspect by placing side-by side with one system of expression other systems of expression - the bondage in which one analogy holds us can be broken by placing another [analogy] alongside which we can acknowledge to be equally well justified.[63]

---

57 Ibid., Part I, section 144.

58 Ibid., Part I, section 127.

59 Ibid., Part I, section 90.

60 Ibid., Part I, section 122.

61 Ibid., Part I, sections 130-31.

62 Ibid., Part I, sections 115, 130.

63 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *TS 220*, quoted in Baker "Section 122" 440.

The systems of expression and objects of comparison of the survey, Wittgenstein tells us, are not "preparatory studies for a future regularization of language - as it were first approximations" but are meant to "throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities." An object of comparison is not "a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond" but "so to speak, a measuring rod."[64] The survey employs rival examples or pictures which illustrate and explore the many possibilities of the phenomena in question or a technique of noting similarities and differences between various language-games. The survey thereby shows how we are both grounded in certain conventional uses of language, self-understandings, schemes or 'ways of seeing' and how such conventional self-understandings are part of an irreducible plurality of possible ways of seeing things.

Wittgenstein's famous example of 'objects of comparison', what he calls the survey, is to introduce 'games' as an analogy to 'language'. Beginning at section 66 of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein guides his interlocutor through the variety of games, pointing out that there is not one thing, or one set of common properties, common to all games such that the word 'game' has an essential meaning. Despite the absence of a common or essential property, the use of the word 'game' is justified because there are similarities *as well as* differences; because there are 'family resemblances' in all the practices that together we call 'games'; not a common use that unites the variety of particular uses but "...a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing."[65]

---

64 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, sections 130-31.

65 Ibid., Part I, sections 66-67.

The Comparative-Dialogical Wittgensteinians: Kuhn, Skinner and Taylor

The dialogical Wittgensteinians follow this 'comparative', family-resemblance view of rational adjudication. For example Charles Taylor explains how we can avoid the impasse of two equal and opposite mistakes: on the one hand, ignoring self-descriptions altogether and adopting a neutral observation language; on the other hand taking these descriptions "with ultimate seriousness, so that they become incorrigible" and so adopting a form of conceptual or cultural relativism (what Taylor calls 'vulgar Wittgensteinianism'). Taylor's proposed alternative is a 'language of perspicuous contrast' - a view that "doesn't automatically assume that our language of understanding is correct and that foreign languages are wrong" but, on the contrary, starts with the assumption that "we may learn something more about ourselves as well in coming to understand another society." Taylor calls this "a form of realism which has learnt from...non-vulgar Wittgensteinianism":

> Following this form of realism, the adequate language in which we can
> understand another society is not our language of understanding, or
> theirs, but rather what one could call a language of perspicuous
> contrast. This would be a language in which we could formulate both
> their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some
> human constants at work in both. It would be a language in which the
> possible human variations would be so formulated that both our form
> of life and theirs could be perspicuously described as alternative such
> variations. Such a language of contrast might show their language of
> understanding to be distorted or inadequate in some respects, or it
> might show ours to be so (in which case, we might find that
> understanding them leads to an alteration in our self-understanding,
> and hence our form of life - a far from unknown process in history); or
> it might show both to be so.[66]

---

[66] Charles Taylor "Understanding and Explanation," 205-206. Cf Charles Taylor,"Understanding and Ethnocentricity," *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*(Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1986) 125-26. According to Taylor his notion of a 'language of perspicuous contrast' is very close to Gadamer's conception of the 'fusion of horizons'. Taylor, "Understanding and Explanation"

Despite his important differences with Taylor, Skinner's philosophy of history accords with many of the comparative Wittgensteinian assumptions articulated in Taylor's view, and with the concept of 'perspicuous representation'. Describing Wittgenstein's remark that 'words are also deeds' as a "classic statement" of his own alternative methodological commitments,[67] Skinner develops an innovative historical Wittgensteinianism that calls it to question the traditional methods of doing history as a search for the essential meanings of a text or a causally-determining fixed context. Citing sections 43 and 79 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Skinner responds to these historiographical practices by arguing that the "appropriate, and famous, formula" for historical investigation is that we should look for not the essential or fixed meanings of words, "but their use."[68] Skinner's alternative approach is one in which "we must study all the various situations which may change in complex ways, in which the given form of words can logically be used - all the functions the words can serve, all the various things that can be done with them."[69] A proper historical understanding is an ongoing and aspectival process in which we grasp what point a given expression might have had for the agents who use it, "what range of uses the expression itself could sustain."[70] Skinner describes his use-based historiography as follows:

---

205. I argue in Chapter III, that this concept is very close to Wittgenstein's conception of 'perspicuous representation'.

67 Skinner also describes 'words are deeds' as a "central insight". Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics,"
Meaning and Context, ed.Tully, 260.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 55.

70 Ibid., 56.

...as soon as we see that there *is* no determinate idea to which various writers contributed but only a variety statements made with the words by a variety of different agents with a variety of intentions, then what we are seeing is equally that history of ideas must focus on the various agents who used the ideas and on their varying situations and intentions for using them.[71]

And this approach, he attributes to Wittgenstein:

...to explicate a concept...is to give an account of the meanings of the terms habitually used to express it. And to understand the meanings of such terms...is a matter of understanding their correct usage, of grasping what can and cannot be said and done with them. So far so good; or rather, so far so Wittgensteinian, which I am prepared to suppose amounts in these matter to the same thing.[72]

Skinner's approach is a survey of the "gradual emergence of the vocabulary of modern political thought"[73] and like Wittgenstein, his aim is comparison: recovering "discarded traditions of thought"[74] and retrieving the variety of things that "have been said and done with"[75] concepts at earlier phases in the history of western culture in order to "supplement and correct" prevailing and misleading restricted senses of what "can and cannot be said and done"[76] with various concepts of social and political philosophy. Skinner's aim is to invoke the past as an object of comparison in order to question rather than simply underpin contemporary beliefs.[77]

---

71 Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. Tully, 56.

72 Skinner "The Idea of Negative Liberty," 198.

73 See Quentin Skinner *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vols. I & II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) back cover of paperback edition. Cited in James Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword: Quentin Skinner's Analysis of Politics," *Meaning and Context*, ed. Tully, 17.

74 Skinner "The Idea of Negative Liberty" 197.

75 Ibid., 198.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 200.

Skinner shows that by employing this method of 'surveying' the use of concepts we can avoid assessing foreign beliefs from an historically-invariant conception of truth and instead take seriously their 'rational acceptability'. However Skinner insists this method does *not* entail, as the relativist-conservative Wittgensteinians suggest, "that we are precluded from asking about the truth of unfamiliar beliefs on the ground that they can only be understood as part of a form of life that may be ultimately no less cognitively justifiable than our own." On the contrary, that way of stating the thesis of conceptual relativism "is self-refuting as it stands, embodying as it does the statement of a preferred point of view while denying that any such point of view can be attained."[78]

Skinner claims that the abandonment of an objective or an 'external' standard of reason does not "preclude the idea of assessing beliefs for their rationality."[79] Rejecting Rorty's claim that we cannot hope to apply the concept of rationality in the assessment of beliefs, Skinner argues:

> We need to begin be recreating as sympathetically as possible a sense of what was held to connect with what, and what was held to count as a reason for what, among the people we are studying. Otherwise we are sure to commit the characteristic sin of the 'whig' intellectual historian: that of imputing incoherence or irrationality where we have merely failed to identify some local canon of rational acceptability. I cannot see, however, why it should be supposed to follow that our interpretative charity must always be boundless. On the contrary, there may be many cases in which, if we are to identify what needs to be explained, it may be crucial to insist, of a given belief, that it was less than rational for a given agent to have upheld it.[80]

Thomas Kuhn agrees that abandoning "semantically-neutral" techniques for

---

78 Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics" 257.
79 Ibid., 243.
80 Ibid., 244. Skinner cites Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 174.

theory choice and "denying the existence of a vocabulary adequate to neutral observation reports" does not render impossible the task of choosing among conflicting claims to truth:

> One can deny, as Feyerabend and I do, the existence of an observation language shared in its entirety by two theories and still hope to preserve good reasons for choosing between them. To achieve this goal, however, philosophers of science will need to follow other contemporary philosophers in examining, to a previously unprecedented depth, the manner in which language fits the world, asking how terms attach to nature, how those attachments are learned, and how they are transmitted from one generation to another by members of a language community.[81]

One of the "contemporary philosophers" Kuhn is referring to here is Wittgenstein and Kuhn's innovative philosophy of the sciences is in fact directly influenced by the *Philosophical Investigations*.[82] In particular, Kuhn accepts the basic assumptions of the 'language-games' and 'family resemblance' arguments as he calls into question the traditional image of science as either a highly rule-determined or relentlessly self-critical enterprise. Kuhn turns to the games analogy, Wittgenstein's comparative philosophical understanding, to argue that science is a collection of rational practices even in the absence of a comprehensive theory or set of rules that could unite its various elements. Kuhn's alternative image is one in which science is characterized by both tradition and innovation, in which unquestioned, customary practices, rather than explicit rules, govern the day to day enterprise and in which occasional revolutionary episodes punctuate these conventional understandings.

---

81 Thomas Kuhn, "Reflections on My Critics," *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 234-235.

82 Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 3. See particularly Kuhn's chapter V, entitled "The Priority of Paradigms" where direct reference is made to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

Because proponents of different scientific theories are not in fact isolated from the social and political imperatives that constitute their historical identities, because they are "like members of different language-communities" the languages of science cannot be understood as ontologically superior to other languages, as somehow "closer to...the truth", or better representations of "what nature is really like" or "what is really there."[83] As Kuhn writes:

Perhaps there is some other way of salvaging the notion of 'truth' for application to whole theories, but this one will not do. There is I think, no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like 'really there'; the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its "real" counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle. Besides, as a historian, I am impressed with the implausibility of the view. I do not doubt for example, that Newton's mechanics improves on Aristotle's and that Einstein's improves on Newton's as instruments for puzzle-solving. But I can see in their succession no coherent direction of ontological development. On the contrary, in some important respects, though by no means all, Einstein's general theory of relativity is closer to Aristotle's than either of them is to Newton's. Though the temptation to describe that position as relativistic is understandable, the description seems to me wrong.[84]

Scientific understanding on Kuhn's view develops and progresses not because its customary languages of understanding (its paradigms) correspond to a description-independent or value-free truth. A scientific paradigm is "usually felt to be better" than its predecessors only in the sense that it is a better instrument for discovering and solving puzzles neither because it answers "the same set of fixed problems in accordance with the same set of fixed canons...."[85] nor that it conforms to "observations that themselves are fixed once and for all by the nature of the environment and of the perceptual

---

83 Ibid., 206.

84 Ibid., 206-07.

85 Ibid., 138.

apparatus."[86]

Kuhn's survey of the variety of historically-constituted scientific practices, his perspicuous representation, is partly aimed at dislodging the presumption of uniqueness of the "traditional epistemological paradigm" that he correctly attributes to Descartes and replacing this picture holding us captive with a comparative understanding of science. Showing similarities and differences between the variety of scientific paradigms, Kuhn succeeds in bringing to our awareness an image that recognizes that customary scientific practices are different 'ways of seeing things'. What Kuhn calls 'normal scientific' activity is not the notion that scientists have different interpretations of the same description-independent reality but the view that they actually "see differently" and "work in a different world."[87]

Highly consistent with the Wittgensteinian view that informs it, Kuhn's position is that paradigms can be ranked in terms of the way they classify and describe a causally-independent reality but this 'reality' is not separate from its classification or description. In other words Kuhn agrees with the claim that there is no such thing as description-independence even if there is causal independence, but unlike Rorty and Davidson, we can still talk about schemes and ranking them. In other words, Kuhn preserves the idea of a 'background' while accepting neither that it is a fixed and independent reality, nor that aspects of it cannot be articulated and compared. For Kuhn at least, there is a fact of the matter.

Taylor describes his 'realism' in very similar terms, addressing not just how our language is used to understand causally-independent objects (as Kuhn

---

86 Ibid., 120.
87 Ibid., 121.

does), but also how our language is used to understand subjects as agents of self-definition, whose practice is shaped by their understanding. In both cases, Taylor rejects Rorty's claim that we should abandon the scheme/content distinction, and defends a concept of the background. First Taylor argues that "we can identify schemes as alternative ways of describing the same reality" and "we can sometimes rank them":

> There are very important matters about how things work in our galaxy which you can't get a handle on unless you can distinguish stars from planets (in our sense) which orbit around them. A way of talking which puts the sun and Mars in the same category is going to be incapable of dealing with these. So it has to be replaced. Now...I haven't appealed to anything in this example that Rorty doesn't also accept. There are things which are causally independent from us (here the stars and planets...). These things are causally related in various ways. Further these things can be classified in different ways. Some alternative classifications are rivals because they purport to allow us to come to grips with the same questions: here issues about the motions and causes of motions of the earth and the heavenly bodies. Between these, we can sometimes show that one is superior to the other, because it allows us to make plain important features of motion and the causes of motion which the other fudges, misrepresents or makes unstatable.[88]

Coming to see this "at no point involves somehow grasping the world independently of any description":

> So a scheme can't be compared to reality unframed by any scheme. And not all schemes can be ranked, because some raise quite different questions. Indeed questions only arise because there are schemes. But when all this is said, some schemes can be ranked; and ranked because they permit us to grasp, or prevent us from grasping features of reality, including causal features, which we recognize as being independent of us. This is the nub of what I want to call realism. It involves ranking

---

[88] Charles Taylor, "Reply and Re-articulation: Charles Taylor Replies," *Philosophy in An Age of Pluralism*, ed. Tully, 220.

(some) schemes, and ranking them in terms of their ability to cope with, allow us to know, describe, come to understand reality.[89]

The second aspect of Taylor's defence of the background is the claim that it is important to distinguish something like a scheme and content when we are dealing with different "takes" of very different cultures on nature and the human condition. Taylor writes:

> Here I think the Davidsonian rejection of the distinction runs us into incoherence or worse. The standard danger here is ethnocentrism, misunderstanding the other because he/she is interpreted as operating with the same classifications as we are. The differences in behaviour are then often simply coded as bad versus good.[90]

What is needed, Taylor states, is not the Davidsonian 'principle of charity', which means "make the best sense of them in what we understand as sense" but rather "coming to understand that there is a very different way of understanding human life, the cosmos, the holy, etc." Somewhere along the line, he continues, you need "some place in your ontology" for something like another "way of seeing things."[91] This second claim is distinct from the one that our language helps us understand a causally-independent reality. The second claim identifies "the kinds of changes in self-understanding which change us." This is a change which is not just the recognition of a continuing reality, but nor is it simply a matter of changing realities justifying changing descriptions. Taylor tells us that there is

> ...a change in description which also alters what is being described. And yet we can also sometimes rank the descriptions as being more or less self-clairvoyant, or more or less self-deluding. There is a complexity of

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid., 221.

91 Ibid.

relations here, which is not captured simply by saying that I make a predicate true of myself by taking on the description, as Rorty seems to be saying. It is trivially true that I make the predicate...'self-described Montrealer' true of myself when I answer your question where I come from. But the whole dynamic between description, reality and truth, noted in the previous paragraph will normally be absent in this second case.[92]

Taylor's point, one repeatedly made by Wittgenstein throughout his post-Tractarian philosophy[93] is that a framework of explanation in the human sciences is not about causally-independent objects where the truths of such causal powers do not change the objects, but is about the practices of self-defining subjects; the explanation is interwoven in those practices in the sense that it can transform those practices by being accepted by what the theory bears upon. This connectedness between a language and what it describes also suggest that it is inextricably connected to a certain set of values; a framework cannot fail to contain some, even implicit conception of human needs, wants, desires and purposes - in short a notion of the good. So an explanatory-framework of our practices is also an evaluation of those practices and can undermine, strengthen or transform the practice and self-understanding that it bears upon.[94]

In brief, the absence of neutral standards for adjudication does not entail, as Winch suggests, that understanding the agent involves uncritically adopting his or her point of view, or describing and accounting for what she does solely in her own terms, or those of his society and time.[95] It does not entail, as Rorty and Davidson suggest, that we drop completely the idea that the

---

92 Ibid.

93 See for example *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, sections 23 and 570.

94 Charles Taylor, "Neutrality in Political Science," *Philosophical Papers* 2, 58-90 and "Political Theory as Practice," *Social Theory and Political Practice: Wolfson College Lectures 1981*, ed. Christopher Lloyd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) 91-115.

95 Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity" 117.

background can be represented at all and instead opting for a practice of scheme-free 'persuasion'. Instead Kuhn, Skinner and Taylor propose comparison (perspicuous representation) as a technique of rational persuasion rather than presenting persuasion a rational end in itself. It is this crucial concept of 'perspicuous representation' that gets missed by the argument of a unitary and determinate background, and its opponents who argue that 'persuasion' is what mediates, adjudicates, arbitrates or reconciles conflict. The comparative-dialogical Wittgensteinians argue that to have a clear understanding, to have 'perspicuity', to know how to distinguish correct and incorrect use of our words, is not simply to be persuaded by one use or another, but to have *comparative* understanding.

Failing to see how comparison is part of the dialogical practice of persuasion can result not only in misunderstanding but, as Wittgenstein himself notes in *On Certainty*, the worst kinds of ethnocentrism. In a group of remarks written near the end of his life, Wittgenstein explains why rational arbitration cannot simply be reduced to 'persuasion', why the practice of persuasion alone is not, as Rorty suggests, the alternative to force, but in a certain sense can be part of it. He describes a situation in which we meet people who do not accept what we call a 'good ground', such as a principle of physics.

> Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle. (And for that we consider them primitive.) Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it?—If we call this "wrong" aren't we using our language-game as a base from which to *combat* theirs?

> And are we right or wrong to combat it? Of course there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings.

> Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic.

I said I would 'combat' the other man,—but wouldn't I give him reasons? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes persuasion. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)[96]

These remarks resemble a line of argument from the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* , recognized as among Wittgenstein's earliest attempts to formulate his new philosophical position. Wittgenstein rejected James George Frazer's attempt to judge the practices of "primitive" societies from the point of view of the scientific practices of contemporary European societies. Frazer's account made these practices "appear as mistakes" as "stupid actions."[97] Rather than assuming that unfamiliar practices are done "out of sheer stupidity", as error, our explanations of different ways of life or practices, Wittgenstein argues, should be based on the assumption that there are reasons-in-practice:

> The same savage who, apparently in order to kill his enemy, sticks his knife through a picture of him, really does build his hut of wood and cuts his arrow with skill and not in effigy.[98]

The lesson here is that freeing ourselves from the craving for generality, abandoning our contempt for the particular, learning by examples and cases, does not automatically land us in Rorty's camp. To have a perspicuous representation is not simply to be 'persuaded' (converted) but to be persuaded and converted voluntarily through reasons and comparative dialogue. This is to say that understanding is dialogical - an activity engaged in with others who see things differently (i.e. have different analogies). It is not only the activity of persuading, training and explaining to someone who doesn't

96 *On Certainty*, sections 609-612.
97 *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, 1e.
98 Ibid., 4e.

know, but it is also the activity of giving reasons, seeking mutual understanding and agreement. An account of rational arbitration must explain the central practices of 'understanding' such as exchanging reasons in discussions in politics or in the humanities and social sciences, or in cross-cultural understanding and not simply the act of truth-free persuasion.

What Wittgenstein seems to tell us is that it is only when 'persuasion' is connected to 'comparison' that it loses its missionary aspects, and carries its democratic dialogical ones. In Skinner's words, "if as historians we come upon contradictory beliefs, we should start by assuming that we must in some way have misunderstood or mistranslated some propositions by which they are expressed." He adds: "to treat all interpretations as failures unless they yield complete intelligibility is to adopt an unduly optimistic view of what we can hope to bring back with us from the foreign lands of the past."[99]

And so it is this concept of perspicuous representation that distinguishes the conservative and relativist Wittgensteinians from the comparative-dialogical ones, such as Skinner, Taylor and Kuhn. Each attempt to free the modern identity from the terms of a certain received 'common sense', and each mobilize a historical 'survey' to do so. This is apparent in Kuhn's comparative history of the varied conventional practices of science; in Skinner's use of history to free us from the domineering post-civic humanist conceptions of liberty; and Taylor's historical survey of the heterogeneous and polysemic sources of the modern identity. In each case of 'grammar' that these authors survey, namely, science, liberty and the self these authors each identify an underlying monological and unilingual picture that so captivates these evaluative descriptive terms and the modern practices they bear upon, that we cannot even see what an alternative could conceivably look like. Each

---

99 Skinner "A Reply to My Critics" 258, 259.

identifies a conceptual understanding and set of practices that are expressed as unshakeable ideals, as the essence of science, liberty and the self and in each case the three comparative-dialogical Wittgensteinians offer a perspicuous representation to, in Taylor's words "show the [picture] as one possible construal among others, rather than the only conceivable picture... of the world"[100] and "to make people multilingual philosophically about the polity."[101]

III. Convention and Innovation in Current Wittgenstein Scholarship

I am not trying to suggest that the comparative-dialogical Wittgenstein do not have important differences. While they all reject the idea that our forms of life are rule- and context-determined and while they all take the Wittgensteinian turn towards indeterminacy, the three comparative-dialogical Wittgensteinians I survey show differences in the sort of attitude they do take up to the 'background'. They start from the position of analogical and practical reason, (the background is the motley of practices), and then go on in slightly different ways in their projects of bringing some aspects of this background into the foreground in order to capture different aspects of linguistic use. These differences are apparent particularly between Skinner and Taylor.

On Charles Taylor's account, he makes some background conventions partially explicit, these give us a sketch of a moral source that gives expression to the outlook of an age or period, and we should affirm this as one aspect of the modern identity. On Quentin Skinner's account, he makes some background conventions partially explicit, these give us a sketch of

---

100 Taylor, "Philosophy and Its History" 18.

101 Charles Taylor, "The Philosophy of the Social Sciences," *Political Theory and Political Education*, ed. Melvin Richter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 89.

conventional or normal usage, and then he goes on to ask how authors have contested these in an age or period, rather than affirmed them, for example Machiavelli on *virtù* , and this in turn is used in comparison to the present to free ourselves from our normal conventions or background, for example around liberty. This difference between an attitude of affirmation on Taylor's part and creative contestation on Skinner's is important and fundamental. Taylor's *Sources of the Self* is written in support of an attitude of affirmation of the goods of the present, whereas Skinner's work is written more in an attitude of taking up an agonic or contestatory attitude towards prevailing conventions. This distinction is too crude, of course, since both Taylor and Skinner wish to affirm some things and contest others, but, nonetheless, there is something different in the orientations of their work as a whole.

Wittgenstein acknowledges both these attitudes in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, where he writes:

> 499. To say "This combination of words makes no sense" excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason. If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players be supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may be to shew where the property of one man ends and that of another begins; and so on. So if I draw a boundary line that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for.

> 500. When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation.

To judge something to be nonsense, is to heed or to erect a boundary, and Wittgenstein reminds us that boundaries are drawn *by* *us*, and for quite

different reasons.[102] Boundaries are not permanently fixed, and the meanings
they have are not given once and for all by their 'essence'. A certain kind of
freedom is possible within boundaries: they may be re-drawn or ignored,
what is now included could later be excluded, what can be withdrawn from
circulation could later be introduced.[103]

This way of explaining 'understanding' in terms of indeterminate boundaries
is deeply at odds with what Wittgenstein calls in the *Blue Book* 'our craving
for generality' and 'the contemptuous attitude toward the particular case'.
General explanations are ones that equate philosophy as exclusively the
practice of drawing essential boundary lines or exclusively the practice of
calling them into question. But Wittgenstein writes in section 201 of the
Investigations that "there is a way of grasping a rule...which is exhibited in
what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases." It is not
the general or fixed character of a rule or boundary that holds it place, but
ongoing practice. Practice is not the traditional use of an essential rule, or
being bound by its limits, but being bound by a rule and going against it too.
Part of the practice of following a rule is also engagement in the ongoing
activity of questioning it, arguing in accordance with it, and altering it as we
go along.[104]

Following a rule, understanding it, grasping its meaning, is both 'obeying it' -
following its conventional boundaries - *and* 'going against it' - adopting an

102 As noted by Edwards, *Ethics without Philosophy* 109. Edwards continues: "The canons of sense
are not given once and for all; they vary at different times, for different persons, and for many reasons. To see
judgements of sense and nonsense in this light tends to diminish their apparent 'objectivity' and to make
philosophical criticism that depend- on such judgements seem much less 'scientific' since to make such a
judgement is just to call to attention to a boundary that someone...has drawn in language for a particular
purpose. It is a grammatical remark: 'We don't talk like that.' We don't cross that boundary." Ibid.
103 Ibid., 110-111.
104 As James Tully argues in "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy" 188-89.

ethic of critical inquiry into the boundary's limits, and discussing alternatives to these limits, calling into question one conventional boundary at a time and seeking to go beyond it.[105] In other words, we cannot understand concepts like 'justice', 'liberty', 'the self', or 'science', by simply searching for what is definitive about them, because this search for definition is to privilege *obedience* at the expense of *critical reflection*. Conceptual boundaries are limits, but they are not unshakeable ideals that "you can never get outside" of because "there is no outside; outside you cannot breathe... "[106] On the other hand, it makes no sense to critically contest or 'go against' a concept that does not exist, that we aren't 'obeying' in the first place. You cannot 'go against' a rule if you don't know it, and knowing a rule means being bound by it. As Wittgenstein succinctly states "Would it make sense to say, 'If he did something different every day we should not say he was obeying a rule'? That makes *n o* sense."[107]

IV. Conclusion

Family Resemblances in Kuhn, Skinner and Taylor

The concept of a 'perspicuous representation' offers at least three alternatives to the view offered by Rorty and Davidson, alternatives which together characterize the family resemblance among Taylor, Skinner and Kuhn. First, instead of rejecting moral realism or formalizing truth to a particular language, Charles Taylor, Quentin Skinner and Thomas Kuhn each accept, in their own ways, versions of realism: our moral languages are ways of understanding reality, or the truth, and these languages can be ranked and compared. Furthermore what is 'rational', what is arbitrable by reason, is what is believed true and what is believed to correspond to reality. It is on the basis

---

105 Ibid.

106 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, section 103.

107 Ibid., Part I, section 227.

of their 'realist' positions that each subscribe to a 'persuasion' view of rational arbitration. That is rather than defining rational arbitration exclusively as persuasion, they see the latter as an aspect of comparative dialogue about the truth.

Second, because what dominant ideas prevail and persist are not just the outcome of practices of persuasion but also their truth, the explanation of their fate and prevalence cannot therefore be separated from judgements as to their truth or validity in relation to the needs of the people who live under them. Thus, Quentin Skinner writes: "If we encounter an ideology which we find to be true to the needs of the society living under it, we are sure to treat that very fact as part of the explanation for its success."[108] And this explains Thomas Kuhn's insistence that the history of science be studied not from the point of view of a "our present vantage", dismissing older views "as mere mistakes" but from the viewpoint that gives older views "maximum internal coherence".[109] The realist version of 'persuasion' includes it as part of a comparative strategy to mediate, arbitrate or reconcile conflicting claims to truth; and this comparative strategy is not devoid of the practice of giving reasons. The dialogical Wittgensteinians see 'persuasion' as an aspect, a tool, of democratic comparative dialogue on the applications of various appraisive, or evaluative-descriptive vocabularies (such as 'justice', 'science', 'liberty') to our social and political world; which is another way of saying that comparative dialogue is used to arbitrate, mediate or reconcile varying conceptions of the 'good' - what is considered valuable, worthy, admirable,

108 Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics" 237.

109 Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3 and Thomas Kuhn, "Preface," *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977) xi-xii.

whatever we consider of crucial importance.[110]

The third point (to which the second is really a corollary) has to do with the concept of background. Unlike Rorty and Davidson who insist that we have to abandon the concept of a background (a scheme) because we have to abandon 'representational-independence' (that is, description-independence), Wittgenstein re-invents the concept of representation as *comparison* and re-invents the background as the 'flow' of life'; the background cannot be represented in description-independent terms, but some aspects of the background can be brought into the foreground (can be 'retrieved' or 'articulated') for the specific purpose of comparison. The practice of comparison is a strategy that can be used for various purposes: to challenge the primacy of a practice, by retrieving the inarticulate assumptions embedded in the practice, and thus making alternatives clearer; to restore a practice, by identifying the higher or motivating ideal behind more or less debased or marginalized practices; or to reach an understanding, agreement or negotiated settlement among conflicting forms of life, by comparing and contrasting aspects of the background: the 'background of distinctions' in Taylor's words, the 'appraisive vocabulary' in Skinner's, the prevailing scientific 'paradigm' in Kuhn's.

Indeterminacy, Circumscription and Comparative-Dialogue

In the discussion that ensues, I will show that we do not need to accept the relativist and conservative Wittgensteinian view of the background as either unitary and determinate or non-existent, nor do we have to accept the practice of truth-free persuasion to mediate, adjudicate or reconcile conflicting claims to the truth. What we find with the comparative-dialogical

---

110 I borrow this conception of the 'good' from Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989) 41, 89.

Wittgensteinians is a three-fold conception of the background that frees it from the epistemological straight-jacket and restores its legitimacy as a philosophical concept.

First, the background is the flow of human practices, the bustle of life, and things which are causally independent of those practices that are causally related;

Second, the background is not something that can be understood unframed by any scheme. Aspects of the background (both the flow of human practices and the causally independent objects) can be brought into view for specific purposes, although that 'bringing into view' is not what makes our concepts usable. We designate various names for this 'bringing into view' such as rules, boundaries, aspects, categories, schemes, frameworks, strong-evaluations, 'ways of seeing', conventions, uses, paradigms, language-games, forms of life. This 'bringing into view' is deeply value-laden and conforms to prevailing social and political conventions because it cannot be separated from the indeterminate practices it attempts to explain and categorize.

Third, some classifications, ways of seeing, schemes can be ranked and compared - not to the background unframed, but to each other in terms of the way they capture, point to, identify or grasp certain features of the indeterminate background and also according to the social or political purposes for which the boundaries were drawn in the first place.

These three aspects of the concept of background: indeterminacy, purposive circumscription and comparative persuasion, are all evident in the Wittgensteinians that this dissertation will survey. It is for this reason that I adopt the term 'comparative-dialogical' as a family resemblance concept to

designate their overlapping similarities. For Taylor the background is a locus of unresolved questions of struggle and tension something neither definitive nor final but which can nevertheless be articulated and continually challenged; for Skinner, the background is the motley of practical conflicts giving rise to the creative contestations of innovating ideologists; for Kuhn, there is no paradigm-independent way of describing the background ('what is really there') so science has to be understood as a collection of 'different worlds' of different ways of seeing, as an 'essential tension' between tradition and innovation, divergent and convergent thinking, a set of received beliefs and arbitrary elements.

What has not been clearly recognized is that in spite of their important differences this Wittgensteinian 'praxis of language', this elucidation of persistence and change, is clearly evident in each of these philosophers, in Taylor's 'philosophical anthropology', Skinner's history of social and political ideas, and Kuhn's history and philosophy of the sciences. Each has accepted a reading of Wittgenstein which is greatly at odds with the relativist and conservative view and this reading plays a significant role in each of their accounts of reason and human understanding.

CHAPTER III

Charles Taylor's 'Background of Distinctions' and 'Language of Perspicuous Contrast'

I. Introduction: A Philosopher of Community or Plurality?

Charles Taylor's work can be situated in the contemporary debate about the relationship between constitutional democracy and a politics that recognizes diverse cultural identities. While there is a growing recognition that we live in an age of pluralism, there 's widespread disagreement al cut whether it is possible to reconcile the seemingly incommensurable and irreducible plurality of cultures, values and conceptual frameworks. Among those who agree that such a reconciliation is possible, there is disagreement about what that reconciliation amounts to: whether it necessarily entails a single uniform or comprehensive framework in which the plurality must be reconciled; or whether the plurality of values must be transvalued into a plurality of interlocutors within one common mode of conversation in which differences could be reconciled; or whether reconciliation is negotiated and conditional, on the basis of recognizing and affirming rather than overcoming the irreducible plurality. In short, there is no clear answer to the question about what reconciliation should be in a age of pluralism. One answer comes from Charles Taylor. Since 1989 with the publication of his magisterial *Sources of the Self*, Taylor has sought to retrieve the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the human identity. With the recent publications *The Malaise of Modernity*,[1] *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*,[2] *Philosophy in An Age of Pluralism*,[3] *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism*

---

1 Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord: Anansi, 1991).

2 Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," *Multiculturalism Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994) 25-73.

3 James Tully, ed, *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

and Nationalism,[4] and *Philosophical Arguments*,[5] we have an opportunity to examine more closely Taylor's contribution to this important debate.

However, in order to understand Taylor's position it will be necessary to clear up a number of conceptual misunderstandings that have emerged about his philosophical approach. The misunderstanding stems from Taylor's claim that the goal of reaching a 'common' human understanding, is possible. What Taylor's interlocutors have understood by this and other similar claims is that the kind of reconciliation of diversity that he is proposing is on the basis of a unitary or 'communitarian' view of human agency that entails the promotion, advancement, or advocacy of particular conceptions of the good life, or cultural forms, or that entails that 'the community' replace 'the individual' as the foundation of morality. Consider the various contributors to *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, who rally around this picture of Taylor.[6] That Taylor founds understanding in 'the community' is a claim so conventionally held, that it appears both in charitable[7] and uncharitable

4 Charles Taylor, *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, ed. Guy Laforest (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).

5 Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

6 See particularly Isaiah Berlin, "Introduction," *Philosophy in An Age of Pluralism*, 2-3; Susan James, "Internal and External in the Work of Descartes," Ibid., 7; Quentin Skinner, "Modernity and Disenchantment: Some Historical Reflections," Ibid., 37-48; Daniel M. Weinstock, "The Political Theory of Strong Evaluation," Ibid., 172.

7 See for example, Vincent Descombes, "Is There an Objective Spirit?" Ibid., 107. Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift argue that according to Taylor the human identity is "derived from the linguistic community." They also claim that Taylor's view is that our moral judgements and intuitions "are essentially capable of rational elucidation or articulation, a process that requires the invocation of fundamental and wide-ranging evaluative frameworks, also deriving from the community." Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 102. This is a misleading reading of 'articulation' and 'evaluation', a point I will return to below.

readings of Taylor's work.[8] The various commentaries, both sympathetic and hostile, take his use of 'common understanding' to mean either a homogeneous or uniform understanding, such as a single goal, an harmonious collective action, an encompassing common good, or common uses of reason; or they see it as the uncritical acceptance of or subjection to the authority of a traditional way of life, our inherited values and institutions; or they take it as the endorsement of a single principle of morality or politics from which everything can be deduced, be that in 'the community' or humanity's 'communal nature'.

My aim in this chapter is to encourage a new way of looking at Charles Taylor's philosophy to suggest that there is another way seeing what Taylor is up to, by calling into question the conventional picture. I will argue that the concept of 'understanding' is for Taylor not based on community agreement but in a multiplicity of different and similar uses, in both unity and difference. In this regard, Charles Taylor is not a philosopher of community, but a philosopher of plurality. I will support this view by surveying unnoticed aspects of Taylor's philosophy, for the purpose of seeing his project differently. The path that I intend to take is to go to Wittgenstein, one of the overlooked influences of Taylor, and show the parallels that exist between

---

8 In less charitable, more caricatural, readings of Taylor this 'community foundation' reading of 'common understanding' is taken to mean that some liberal institutions should be dispensed with or curtailed, or worse, that liberal practices "should be razed and replaced by a system celebrating the supremacy of society over the individual." See Nancy Rosenblum, "Pluralism and Self-Defence," *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989) 216.The comment in footnote 14, page 283 suggests that Rosenblum does not really understand Taylor's notion that human understanding must allow the "otherness to be". She equates this view with creating "more space" a point to which I will return below. See also Stephen Holmes, "The Permanent Structure of Antiliberal Thought," Ibid ., fn 21, page 286. At best, Holmes' article reads more like a political pamphlet than an essay whose aim is to reach an understanding. At worst, it is simply one gross characterization after another. For example see page 233 where Holmes argues that by invoking the 'good', philosophers like Charles Taylor leave out the "prominent place of a selfless cruelty in human affairs" such as, religious fundamentalism, terrorism and ethnic warfare. Also see page 234 where Holmes makes a preposterous comparison to fascism.

them. Comparing the two thinkers will allow us to understand more perspicuously how Taylor proposes that the seemingly divergent values and frameworks of modernity can be reconciled, how a common understanding can be achieved in a way that is not homogeneous or based on blind acceptance of tradition or an endorsement of a single principle of morality. By retrieving the Wittgensteinian sources of Charles Taylor's work, the chapter will show how Taylor's search for a common language does not entail uniformity, homogeneity, harmony or common use; nor is it grounded in an uncritical acceptance of our institutions and practices; neither is it founded on nor does it assume the acceptance of a single, or set of, all-embracing principles of politics or morality from which everything can be deduced, such as 'the community'.

I will show how Taylor's reconciliation of differences is achieved by recognizing and affirming, rather than overcoming, irreducible plurality and the conditional nature of any reconciliation.[9] This conditional reconciliation is constituted by the "language of perspicuous contrast"— a language that recognizes that understanding embodies an implicit background of distinctions that mark out our sense of what is valuable, some of which can be articulated when we try to come to understand others. This language of contrast starts from the irreducible plurality of values, cultures and forms of reflection, and aims at a common understanding (a reconciliation). But Taylor does not use 'common' to mean a uniform or fixed foundation of understanding. He argues that the language of common understanding can be a language "to understand and mediate cultural difference", a "language for alternative modernities, different ways of living the political and economic

9 As Tully observes, in the "Preface" to *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, xiv. See also Guy Laforest's careful treatment of Taylor's work, "Philosophy and Political Judgement in a Multinational Federation," Ibid., 194-209 and his "Introduction," *Reconciling the Solitudes*, ix-xv.

structures that the contemporary ages makes mandatory", and a language for "cultural diversity or finding a way of understanding modernity which makes room for these alternatives."[10]

The Dialogical Self

In many important respects, Charles Taylor's philosophy shares little with that of Wittgenstein. Taylor is known for the influence of Aristotle, Hegel, the Romantic conceptions of language of Herder and Humboldt, the phenomenological tradition of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger and the post-Heideggerian hermeneutical tradition of Gadamer and Ricoeur. Moreover some have argued that Taylor's philosophy is greatly at odds with that of Wittgenstein.[11] My aim is not to deny these important influences, nor is it to deny the many important differences between Taylor and Wittgenstein. Rather I intend to draw our attention to the significant similarities, family resemblances, between these two important thinkers, similarities that may not be easily seen. In so doing my aim is to expose a new possibility for understanding the richness of Taylor's political philosophy. Understanding Taylor will in turn help us better understand the modern political identity in an age of pluralism.

The first aspect of Taylor's use of common understanding, is the analogy he makes with a continuing conversation. In response to Vincent Descombes, Taylor points out that the paradigm example of his use of 'common' is a conversation where "one speaks and the other listens, then the roles reverse, but unlike singing in unison or chanting slogans in the square, there is always a difference in role at any moment."[12] The difference he draws is with

---

10 Taylor "Preface," *Philosophical Arguments*, xi, xii.

11 See Tully, "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy".

12 Taylor, "Reply and Re-articulation" 237.

a type of common action which consists of many people performing identically out of a sense of common purpose (such as a demonstration or a protest). And, contrary to Isaiah Berlin's suggestion that Taylor's idea is tantamount to acting in a harmonious collective fashion, he states that his use of 'common' is not like "singing in unison". There is always a difference in role.

This aspect of a continuing conversation is a paradigm case of what Taylor refers to as "a crucial feature of the human condition rendered almost invisible by the overwhelmingly monological bent of mainstream modern philosophy". This is "its fundamentally dialogical character." That is, we become full human agents capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression.[13] We are inducted into these languages, we learn them, in exchange with others. People do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own. Rather, "we are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us - what George Herbert Mead called 'significant others'. The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical."[14]

For Taylor dialogicality is not just a fact about *genesis*, which can be ignored later on. Our identity is defined "always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us." Even after we outgrow some of these others - our parents, for instance - and they disappear from our lives, "the conversation with them continues within us

---

13 Taylor uses 'language' in a broad sense to mean not only the words we speak but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, "including the 'languages' of art, of gesture, of love, and the like." Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" 32; Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity* 33.

14 Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" 33.

as long as we live. Thus the contribution of significant others, even when it is provided at the beginning of our lives, continues indefinitely."[15] On this view, my discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, "but that I *negotiate it* through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others."[16]

Since the publication in 1964 of his *Explanation of Behaviour,*[17] Taylor has struggled against three variations of the overwhelmingly monological bent of mainstream modern philosophy that have rendered invisible the fundamentally dialogical feature of human life: naturalism; the individualism of self-fulfilment (the 'self-centred' modes of the ideal of self-fulfilment); and the slide to subjectivism.[18] Taylor argues that these tendencies have had "complex, criss-crossing relations" providing mutual strength and "a certain patina of deeper philosophical justification" to the monological ideal.[19]

Two Uses of 'Self-Understanding': Interpretation or Practice?

Taylor's claim that one's identity (one's self-understanding) is established in practice, in a continuing conversation or exchange with others, is similar to many of Wittgenstein's claims in the *Philosophical Investigations* and specifically his central argument about language-games, that we understand the meaning of a word by actually using it, by being "trained to its use"[20] and that language is interwoven in human action. Nevertheless, I want to

---

15 Ibid .

16 Ibid., 34. Italics added.

17 Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).

18 By which Taylor means the politics of equal value; the neo-Nietzschean denial of higher standards, horizons of significance and frameworks; the presumption that all judgements of worth are based on standards imposed by and further entrench structures of power.

19 Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity* 60-61.

20 *Blue and Brown Books* 77; *Philosophical Investigations* sections 5, 6, 27, 30-33.

consider an objection to the claim that this 'dialogical' aspect of language is similar to that of Wittgenstein's account. The objection is that Taylor mistakenly conflates 'interpretation' and 'understanding' and thereby grants an essential status to interpretation, so that dialogue is grounded in interpretation. There are in fact two ways that Taylor uses the concept of self-understanding: one is the way used in the concept of 'self-interpretation' wherein Taylor grants an essential status to the activity of interpreting; the second (non-interpretational) use de-emphasises the essential status of interpreting and places greater emphasis on self-understanding as engagement in the world, so that 'understanding' is grounded in customary use.[21]

In Taylor's writings prior to 1981 there is an emphasis on self-understanding as self-interpretation. We are self-interpreting animals in the sense that interpretation is essential to human existence and human understanding and in the sense that the most fundamental ways in which humans understand themselves are interpretations.[22] However, this thesis on self-interpretation is rendered somewhat ambiguous with the publication of *Sources of the Self.* Here, Taylor uses 'self-understanding' to mean 'self-interpretation'.[23] But Taylor also accepts a claim, whose familiarity he attributes to Wittgenstein,

---

21 I would argue that this emphasis on 'use' rather than interpretation distinguishes Taylor's hermeneutical method from Gadamer's who claims that interpretation is "not an occasional additional act subsequent to understanding, but rather understanding is always an interpretation." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 274.

22Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1985) 45, 63-65, 74-76.

23 Citing his *Philosophical Papers 1*, chapters 1, 2 and 4 and his *Philosophical Papers 2*, chapter 1, Taylor argues that the self (human identity) is "essentially defined by the way things have significance for me" and things have significance for me "only through a language of interpretation which I have come to accept as a valid articulation of these issues." The self is "partly constituted by its self-interpretations." Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 34. Furthermore he attributes his position to the point that understanding is "interpretation all the way down" Ibid., fn 6, 524.

that the self's interpretations can never be fully explicit or articulated. Explicit understanding of what is implicit in our moral and evaluative languages is impossible; articulation is never completed.[24] And in a chapter entitled "A Digression on Historical Explanation", Taylor argues that new revolutionary interpretations may arise partly because a practice is under threat, perhaps for reasons quite extraneous to the ideas. Or a given interpretation of things will gain force because the practice is flourishing.[25] Like Wittgenstein, Taylor is saying here that practices are fundamental not interpretations, as Wittgenstein tells us, what grounds understanding is not a kind of interpreting or seeing but "...it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of a language-game."[26]

Furthermore, the Wittgenstein scholar James Tully remarked that the book is different from Taylor's previous writings in the sense that he avoids providing a description of the modern identity from completely within the perspective of the expressivist framework, which characterises his earlier work. Instead he employs the method of a survey, which is meant to retrieve the "heterogeneity of our polysemic identity and to render each source its due place"[27] through comparison and contrast:

> ...the various identities are arranged higgledly-piggledly as they arose historically and were built on to earlier identities in various ways. The disposition to attempt to arrange these constructions in a progression or a regression or a supercession are shown to be constitutive features of different identities within the modern self, not some meta-framework outside the boundaries of the city. This Wittgenstein aspect of the survey differentiates this book from the author's earlier work.[28]

---

24 Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 34.

25 Ibid., 206.

26 *On Certainty*, section 204.

27 James Tully, "The Common House of Europe: An Appreciation of the *Sources of the Self*," (1989) 10.

28 Ibid., 5.

So, Taylor does use 'self-understanding' in a way that is similar to Wittgenstein and he acknowledges this as one of his influences well before the publication of *Sources of the Self* beginning with his 1981 article "Understanding and Explanation in the *Geisteswissenschaften* ".[29] Here Taylor de-emphasizes the 'essential' feature of interpretation and accepts the language-games view of self-understanding as understanding in use (that understanding exists in ongoing practice). According to this Wittgensteinian view, we understand a rule not by having an interpretation or another rule for its application but by being inducted into its use, by actually mastering its use through ongoing participation.[30] We understand (learn) concepts through their use in customary social practices. Taylor accepts this basic Wittgensteinian vocabulary in a number of articles.[31] With the publication of "Philosophy and its History" in 1984 and "Overcoming Epistemology" in 1987, Taylor continues the process of de-throning his earlier emphasis on interpretation by adopting a vocabulary of understanding that is in agreement with that of Wittgenstein.[32] The dialogical Wittgensteinian view defended by Taylor is stated as follows:

---

29 *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, ed. Holtzmann and Leich 191-210.

30 See Tully, "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy" 194-95.

31 See for example "Understanding and Explanation" 2, 6, where Taylor argues that we are self-defining animals in the sense that understanding is an ability to use or apply the concepts ['desirability characterisations', 'portrayals'] that define another's world in the same way, (in the same sense that it has for another), to "master the agents' language of self-description...."

32 In "Philosophy and Its History" Taylor emphasizes how we acquire language through "apprenticeship practices" how we "learn to use" vocabularies and how "we are introduced to the goods, and inducted into the purposes of our society much more and earlier through its inarticulate practices than through formulations." Taylor, "Philosophy and Its History" 23, 24. In "Overcoming Epistemology" Taylor describes self-understanding as "a certain grasp of the world we have as agents in it", "our understanding of the world is grounded in our dealings with it...." Self-understanding is an "awareness about the limits and conditions of our knowing...." Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1987) 477, 480.

Our language itself is woven into a range of social practices, of conversation, exchange, giving and receiving of orders, etc. We learn it only through these exchanges. We learn in particular the virtue terms and the terms for excellences...first through their applications to cases in such exchanges.[33]

In light of critical comments by Tully in the 1989 article "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy", Taylor confirmed this implicit shift in emphasis by agreeing with Tully's assertion that interpretations are not the most fundamental ways in which humans understand themselves.[34] This non-interpretational Wittgensteinian reformulation of 'self-understanding' as 'understanding in practice' is reaffirmed in many writings published after 1990 including *The Malaise of Modernity*,[35] "To Follow a Rule", the replies to his critics in *Philosophy in An Age of Pluralism*,[36] and "Lichtung and Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein" published in *Philosophical Arguments* .

The work of Wittgenstein helps show how the accounts of Taylor's philosophy that contend that he subscribes to a 'communitarian' principle of the primacy and authority of society, that miss this critical idea of practical-dialogue, are too limited in their understanding. What the emphasis on 'community' misses is the crucial claim that the dialogical self is constituted

---

33 Taylor "Philosophy and Its History" 23-24. Compare this to Wittgenstein's point in the *Philosophical Investigations*, section 7 that he will "call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'" and section 19, where he says that a 'language' can consist only of orders and reports in a battle, or only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no, and "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life."

34 Tully, "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy," 196. In discussions with Taylor, he describes this as a shift in vocabulary, not doctrine.

35 See for example page 33.

36 See Taylor's re-consideration of 'interpretation' in his reply to Vincent Descombes, "The Alexandrian didn't 'interpret himself'...he *was* a hermit." Taylor, "Reply and Re-articulation" 239 and "...it is probably a mistake to use this already overloaded term once more in this context...." Ibid., 240.

in the variety of our practices. The accounts which focus on 'community' cannot explain Taylor's paradigm practical activity of understanding, the conversation. A more authentic understanding of Taylor's works would need to take into account not his understanding of community, but the richer proposition that human agency is impossible outside of the "*continuing conversation* of a community, which provides the language by which we draw our *background distinctions....*"[37] I will now explain why the comparison to Wittgenstein helps us understand what Tay'or means by the concepts of the 'background of distinctions' and 'strong evaluation'.

II.   Similarities Between Taylor and Wittgenstein

'Strong-Evaluation' : A Background of Distinctions

In the introduction to his two-volume *Philosophical Papers*, and in Part I of *Sources of the Self*, Taylor argues that a fully competent human being, agent or self, not only has some understanding (which may be also more or less misunderstanding) of herself but is partly constituted by this understanding; and even more crucially, our self-understanding essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a background of 'strong evaluation': a background of distinctions between things which are recognized as of categoric or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this or of lesser value. In fact, the proposition that 'understanding' incorporates or is constituted by a 'background of distinctions' is made throughout the gamut of Taylor's writings. He claims in his early work that it is a thesis of "post-Heideggerian hermeneutics".[38] In *Sources of the Self* and *Philosophical Arguments*, he also draws out the similarities between this view and that of Wittgenstein. In the next part of this chapter I will explain what Taylor means by this claim that our self-understanding (the way we define ourselves and others, our identity)

---

37 Taylor, "Introduction" *Philosophical Papers* 1 &2, 8. Italics added.
38 Ibid., 3.

essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a background of distinctions of 'strong-evaluation'. I will also explain what Taylor means by 'articulating' the background and show similarities between this and Wittgenstein's approach.

Taylor argues that our self-understanding is constituted by strong evaluation or strongly evaluated goods. Formally stated, Taylor speaks of 'strong evaluation',

> ...when the goods putatively identified are not seen as constituted as good by the fact that we desire them, but rather are seen as normative for desire. That is, they are seen as goods which we ought to desire, even if we do not.[39]

This concept of strong evaluation, or the background of distinctions (also called 'framework-definitions', 'hypergoods', 'constitutive goods', 'horizons of significance') is a conceptual tool which means a way of life, (lived experience, a collection of practices), that is implicitly valued or ranked above others, arising through historical supercession of what we consider less adequate lived experiences. The background is what is tacitly relied on and taken for granted, and serves as a standard, an attachment, a moral source, a condition or a context of experience/ intelligibility; it is an underlying motivating outlook, an empowering ideal that allows us to distinguish what is a full life compared to a debased one and allows us to recognize what choices and desires are valuable, worthy, admirable or meaningful from those that are not; it is what we appeal to in judging what is really of importance

---

39 Taylor, "Understanding and Explanation" 193.

and what is not.[40] The claim here is that it is an inescapable feature of personhood that humans evaluate and rank some commitments as higher importance than others. The things that are marked out as of higher importance is what Taylor calls 'good' which means anything valuable we seek or ways of life so valued.[41]

One of the ways we can understand these concepts of a 'background of distinctions' and 'strong evaluation' is by comparing them to Wittgenstein's concepts of rule-following and forms of life. Wittgenstein was not the first to make the point about a 'background' and I am not suggesting that Taylor attributes the point solely to him. Evoking the concept of a 'background' is a form of argument pioneered by Kant and what Taylor calls an "argument from transcendental conditions". This is where the adequacy or inadequacy of an explanation is argued from what is shown to be the indispensable conditions of there being anything like experience or awareness of the world in the first place.[42] This style of argument is carried on by Hegel, Herder, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. In explaining his own characterization of the 'indispensable conditions of experience' or the 'background', Taylor cites all these important influences and a careful understanding of Taylor would demand familiarity with all these authors. My aim here is to shed some light on Taylor's use of this term through one of the authors that influenced this use. My argument is partly that this influence has been a neglected aspect of Taylor's philosophy, particularly among his detractors. Most commentators, both friend and foe alike, fail to provide any

---

40 The concept summarized here appears in almost all of Taylor's writings, too numerous to cite. For examples see Taylor, "Introduction," as well as Chapters 1, 2 and 4 of *Philosophical Papers* 1; Taylor, *Philosophical Papers* 2; Taylor, "Understanding and Explanation"; Taylor,"Overcoming Epistemology"; Part 1 of Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; and Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity* 31-41.

41 See Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 89 and Taylor, "Cross Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Rosemblum, 173.

42 Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology" 473.

serious explanation of the importance of Wittgenstein in Taylor's work, despite the obvious influence.

This Wittgensteinian influence is clearly evident in "To Follow a Rule" in which Taylor explores the place that rules and conventions have in human life.[43] He cites *Philosophical Investigations*, sections 87, 202, 211, 217 and 219 to illustrate and endorse the concept of a background as explained by Wittgenstein, but also to call into question a prevalent interpretation about Wittgenstein on this issue.

First, Taylor remarks on the "unarticulated" nature of understanding that "it always occurs against a background of what is simply relied on and taken for granted."[44] In defending this view of the background, Taylor cites Wittgenstein:

> Wittgenstein stresses the unarticulated, and on occasion even the unarticulable nature of this kind of understanding. "Obeying a rule," he says, "is a practice" (I.202). What is more, the process of giving reasons for the kind of practice that is involved in following a rule must necessarily come to an end at some point: "My reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons" (I.211). Or later: "If I have exhausted my justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do'" (I. 217). More laconically: "When I obey a rule, I do not chose. I obey the rule blindly" (I.219).[45]

Thus Taylor adopts a language-games perspective on the connection between understanding a rule and the background. But more importantly, Taylor's claim about language-games and forms of life is that they must be understood

---

43 Charles Taylor, "To Follow a Rule," *Rules and Conventions: Literature, Philosophy, Social Theory*, ed. Mette Hjort (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) 167-185.

44 Ibid., 169.

45 Ibid., 169-170.

non-monologically which is to say "a perspective in which the agent is *not* primarily the locus of representations, being rather engaged in practices, as a being who acts in and on the world."[46] Taylor remarks that nobody has failed to notice that human beings act, but the crucial difference with the Wittgensteinian perspective is that he situates "the primary locus of the agent's understanding in practice" and to situate our understanding in practice is to see it as implicit in our activity, and "hence irreducible to representations."[47] Taylor states:

> It is not a matter of claiming that we do not frame representations, for we do indeed explicitly formulate what our world is like, what we aim at, and what we are doing. At the same time, however, much of our intelligent action in the world, sensitive as it usually is to our situation and goals, is carried on unformulated. It flows from an understanding that is largely inarticulate.[48]

Taylor argues that this tacit understanding is "more fundamental" than the explicit representational variety because "it is always there, whereas we sometimes frame representations and sometimes do not" and because "the representations that we actually do form are only comprehensible against the background provided by this inarticulate understanding." Thus "to come to see that our understanding resides first of all in our practices is to attribute an inescapable role to the background."[49] This connection between understanding and background (a "famous feature" of both Wittgenstein and Heidegger) entails for Taylor that our understanding is itself "embodied",

---

46 Ibid., 172.
47 Ibid., 173.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 173.

(and so the role of the body appears in a different light[50]) and "the practices that encode this tacit understanding are not instantiated in acts performed by some isolated or single agent."[51] In other words the practices of understanding are dialogical, our understanding of self, society and the world "is carried on in practices consisting of dialogical actions."[52]

> The importance of dialogical action in human life points to the utter inadequacy of the epistemological tradition's view of the subject as a monological vehicle of representations. We cannot understand human life uniquely in terms of individual subjects who react to others as they frame representations about them, for a great deal of human action

---

50 "Our body is not just the medium through which we enact the goals we frame, nor is it simply the locus of causal factors shaping our representations. Our understanding is itself embodied. That is, our bodily know-how, the way we act and move, embraces aspects of our understanding of self and world. I know my way around in a familiar environment inasmuch as I am able to get from place to place with ease and assurance. I may be at a loss to draw a map, or even give explicit directions to a stranger. I know how to manipulate and use the familiar instruments in my world, usually in the same inarticulate fashion." Ibid., 173-174. Taylor's remarks about the 'embodied' nature of understanding are consistent with a remarkable exchange between Wittgenstein and his Cambridge colleague Piero Sraffa as reported by Norman Malcolm. It is well known that Wittgenstein had many discussions with Sraffa about his ideas in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. "One day... when he was insisting that a proposition and what it describes must have some 'logical form', the same 'logical multiplicity', Sraffa made a gesture, familiar to Neapolitans as meaning something like disgust or contempt, of brushing the underneath of his chin with an outward sweep of the finger-tips of one hand. And he asked: 'What is the logical form of *that*?'" Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1958) 69. Sraffa had a significant influence on Wittgenstein, something Wittgenstein himself acknowledges in the "Preface" to the *Philosophical Investigations* where he writes: "...I am indebted to that which a teacher at this university, Mr. P. Sraffa, for many years unceasingly practised on my thoughts. I am indebted to *this* stimulus for the most consequential ideas of this book."

51 Taylor, "To Follow a Rule" 174.

52 Taylor uses 'dialogical' in slightly different ways in "To Follow a Rule" and in the "Reply and Re-articulation" in *Philosophy in An Age of Pluralism*. In the former, an action is dialogical when "it is effected by an integrated, nonindividual agent" and this means for Taylor a kind of shared agency that is evident in actions of common rhythm like dancing, and conversations "with some degree of ease and intimacy...." Taylor "To Follow a Rule" 175-76. However, as I explained above, in his later articulation Taylor cites as a paradigm example of d.alogical understanding not actions of common rhythm, like sir ₀:ng in unison or chanting slogans in the square, but the give and take of a conversation where "one speaks and the other listens" where there is "always a difference in role." Taylor "Reply and Re-articulation" 237. In any case Taylor's sense of "common rhythm" is different from "coordinating my action with yours." Taylor, "To Follow a Rule" 175.

only takes place inasmuch as the agent understands and constitutes him- or herself as an integral part of some "we". [53]

I am suggesting that Taylor's first important point in "To Follow a Rule" is his claim that the embodied background understanding is a combination of features: it is form of understanding, a making sense of things and actions, yet at the same time largely unarticulated.[54] The second important aspect of Taylor's "To Follow a Rule" is the distinction he makes between this dialogical Wittgensteinian view he is advancing and another school of interpreting Wittgenstein that corresponds to a very different way of understanding the phenomenon of the unarticulated background.

There are two distinct ways that commentators have interpreted Wittgenstein's rule-following arguments, such as the remark that "When I obey a rule... I obey blindly." One school of thought stresses the contingency of understanding and connected to this, the role of training and conditioning in shaping understanding. This school suggests that the yardstick of correct understanding, following a rule, entails agreement with or conformity to the behaviour of the majority of one's linguistic community.[55] On this view, when Wittgenstein refers to rule-following as a 'customary practice' he means conformity to community practice. When he refers to being "trained into use" he means we are conditioned to follow rules the right way because they are imposed by our society. Therefore this school's interpretation of Wittgenstein's claim about rule-following ranges from a causal claim about learned patterns of behaviour to the claim that community agreement establishes correct rule-following (that is, human understanding). But Taylor subscribes to neither variation of this community-agreement school, rejecting

53 Taylor "To Follow a Rule" 176.
54 Ibid., 177.
55 Such as the views of Winch and Kripke outlined in Chapter 1.

its monological and determinate orientation as an incorrect reading of the rule-following argument. In fact, Taylor turns to Wittgenstein's understanding of 'rule-following' not to justify a 'communitarian' understanding of human agency, but to help him defend a dialogical conception of the self and human understanding.

Taylor's argument is that the monological tradition interprets the claim that "I act without reasons" as an expression that reasons cannot be given, because this view regards the rules residing our background understanding as not susceptible to justification, being "simply imposed by our society". The connection between a rule and its application on this view is "automatic" a connection we are conditioned to make, or the connection is somehow causal because the rule is "wired in", like blinking.[56] Citing the *Philosophical Investigations*, sections 193-194, 199, 289, Taylor rejects the view that there is a brute causal connection between a rule and its correct application. Rules do not come with their applications, they are not "self-interpreting." What establishes the connection between a rule and its application, (or the sense of a rule) is "standing social usage"; the regular use of a concept "...actually gives my response its sense, a meaning or significance that is embodied rather than represented..."[57] So explicit reason-giving has a limit. Human understanding is ultimately embedded in practice and similarly, the connection between a rule and application is use. But this connection between understanding and use cannot be understood as merely a causal connection. Social practices do not merely impose correct rule-following. Drawing a comparison between Wittgenstein and Aristotle's notion of practical wisdom, Taylor argues that since a rule essentially resides and exists in the practice it guides (the rule, at

---

56 Taylor, "To Follow a Rule" 170.
57 Ibid., 177-78.

any given instant, is what the practice has made it),[58] rules are transformed through practice. There is therefore "a crucial phronetic gap" between a rule and its enactment. The gap between a rule and its application is neglected by explanations that give primacy to either community standards, or rules-as-representations. What these explanations miss is that determining what a norm actually amounts to in any given situation, (correct rule-following) requires not simply an ability to put into effect unchangeable standards or formulae but practical wisdom, an ability to act in each particular situation.[59]

The Wittgensteinian influence on Taylor on the phenomenon of the unarticulated background is further confirmed in the most recently published articles, collected under the distinctly Wittgensteinian name *Philosophical Arguments*. Most notable are: "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein", "The Importance of Herder" and "Irreducibly Social Goods".[60] For example in "The Importance of Herder" Taylor claims that in our day, "Wittgenstein's is the most celebrated formulation" of a thesis that our words have the meaning they have only within a lexicon and a context of language practices, "the 'language-games' we play with them", which are "ultimately embedded in a form of life."[61] Remarking on this holistic connection between meaning and practice, Taylor writes that "its most powerful application in philosophy is in the later work of Wittgenstein."[62]

---

58 "The rule is what animates the practice at any given moment and not some formulation behind it, inscribed in our thoughts, brains, genes, or whatever." The practice is, in effect, an ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation of what the rule really means. Ibid., 182.

59 Ibid., 183.

60 See the following articles in *Philosophical Arguments*: "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments" 21, 25; "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein" 61-78; "The Importance of Herder" 83; 89, 90-91, 96; "Irreducibly Social Goods" 132-33 and footnote 4, 299.

61 Taylor, "The Importance of Herder" 93, 96.

62 "His devastating refutation of 'Augustine's' designative theory of meaning constantly recurs to the background understanding we need to draw on to speak and understand." Ibid., 96.

An Argument From Transcendental Conditions

As I mentioned earlier, Taylor situates this concept of a 'background of distinctions' within a tradition of philosophy he calls an "argument from transcendental conditions" because strong evaluation is shown to be an indispensable condition of there being anything like experience or awareness of the world in the first place. The use of 'transcendental' has however caused some confusion in some of Taylor's interlocutors who see in the concept of a 'background of distinctions' (strong evaluation) an attempt to defend a conception of essential human nature, a unitary common good or the authority of a tradition over critical reason.[63] I have been reviewing the Wittgensteinian influences on Taylor which suggest why his use of the concept of a 'background of distinctions' cannot be understood in such essential terms. There are at least four reasons connected to this Wittgensteinian perspective why Taylor's view of the background cannot be understood in unitary or monological terms.

First it is not fundamentally a universal principle that constitutes the background, that defines the shape of the qualitatively higher or what is valued, but as I explained above the irreducible plurality of our practices.[64] Second, just how to characterize the background, the conditions we are trying to define, "can itself be a problem" because understanding what the background is, is itself part of a process of giving reasons in a conversation.[65] As he puts it in "To Follow a Rule", "the background - what is taken for granted - is not itself the locus of resolved questions."[66]

---

63 See for example Weinstock, "The Political Theory of Strong Evaluation" 174.
64 See Taylor, *Sources of the Self* parts 3-4 and page 206; Taylor, "Philosophy and Its History" 22.
65 Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology" 473.
66 Taylor, "To Follow a Rule" 169.

The third reason why Taylor's use of 'the background' can be understood in neither universal nor monological terms is that he claims that he employs the concept as an argumentative strategy for the same reason as Wittgenstein (among others) who invokes it "to get us out of the cul de sac of monological consciousness." To invoke the concept of a background in this sense is to portray the human agent not primarily as an inner space or a mind or a mechanism capable of processing information or representations but an embedded human an 'engaged agent', "a being who acts in and on a world".[67] For Taylor 'engaged agency' refers to the relationship between to our human experience and the background of values that renders intelligible and meaningful that experience. The term 'background' is used in this dialogical sense: not a fixed foundation that humans appeal to, but a condition of experience, a context that confers intelligibility that gives meaning to human experience and practices, that shapes what it is to be a human self or agent. Taylor has observed that this connection between the background of distinctions and human self-understanding resembles Wittgenstein's claim that our language-games are embedded in forms of life. Thus, both Taylor and Wittgenstein agree that engaged agency (our language-games, and practices and the form of life they are embedded in) are an indispensable condition of human existence, but they are not fixed or unchangeable conditions but dialogical.[68]

Taylor argues that one of the features that distinguishes the dialogical philosophers from monological ones (such as those who defend disengaged and mechanistic perspectives) is that the dialogical philosophers have a place

---

67 Ibid., 172.

68 In "To Follow a Rule" Taylor illustrates the embedded dialogical view of the background, with the assistance of sections 198-199 and 202 of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Taylor's idea of embedded or "engaged agency" and its connection to the background is further explored in Taylor,"Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels Between Heidegger and Wittgenstein" 61-78.

for the concept of a background, so it is not surprising that the philosophies which have challenged the essential, unitary and monological views "have all had some place for the notion of background."[69] Taylor cites Heidegger's notion of pre-understanding and Wittgenstein who "makes use of a similar notion...when he shows what has to be supposed as already understood when we try to define something ostensively or to name something."[70] Taylor goes on to say that the background does not figure in these philosophies only as a doctrine but also "plays a crucial role in their argumentative strategy." The argumentative strategy is what Taylor refers to as 'articulation' of the background that a picture has to suppose. Both Taylor and Wittgenstein broadly share the idea that when a picture of the world becomes so embedded that we become blind to alternatives, the picture's presumption of uniqueness or primacy can be challenged by bringing out the background needed to expose picture's presumption of uniqueness. I will return to this point below.

The fourth reason why Taylor's conception of background cannot be understood as a fixed or universal condition is illustrated when Taylor compares his view to Nietzsche's notion of a 'transvaluation of values'. According to Nietzsche's view, the new transvalued highest good (or the way of life that is strongly valued, in Taylor's terminology) that succeeds by historical supercession is not only erected as a standard by which other, ordinary goods are judged but often radically alters our view of their value, in some cases de-valuing previously strongly valued goods. "Such was the fate of the warrior honour ethic at the hands of Plato, and later of Augustine, and later still in the eyes of the modern ethic of ordinary life." Taylor agrees with Nietzsche's view that a the background of distinctions is not definitive or final. A transvaluation

---

69 Ibid., 70.

70 Ibid.

...is not necessarily a once-for-all affair. The older condemned goods remain; they resist; some seem ineradicable from the human heart. So that the struggle and tension continues.[71]

The Limited Explication of the Background

Because of the undifferentiated connection between our background understanding and the language we use to describe it, the notion of a background has two seemingly contradictory features or conditions. First, it is "that of which I am not simply unaware, because it makes intelligible what I am incontestably aware of."[72] The background is what I am capable of articulating, that is, "what I can bring out of the condition of implicit, unsaid, contextual facilitator -what I can make articulate, in other words." In this activity of articulating, "I trade on my familiarity with this background. What I bring out to articulacy is what I 'always knew' or what I had a 'sense' of, even if I didn't 'know' it." The second feature of the background is "that of not being the focal, explicit object." I am not explicitly or focally aware of the background, because that status is already occupied by what it is making intelligible.

The background has a paradoxical status in that it is both implicit, the context that makes experiences intelligible and understandable, but can also be made explicit and capable of being articulated, because we aren't completely unaware of it. But the paradox can be appreciated, according to Taylor, because as engaged agents, total explication is incoherent. To bring to articulacy is to render explicit some of, not all of, the background, [73] but in articulating we are also critically reflecting on the background, which precludes the

---

71 Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 65.

72 Taylor, "Lichtung or Lebensform" 69.

73 "There must always be a context from which we are attending if we are to understand the experience of a being like this. So bringing to articulation still supposes a background." Ibid., 69, 70.

background understanding—the strongly valued way of life— from ever being fixed. The articulation alters what is being articulated.

Taylor's claim is that the background understanding embodies a normative standard and that some elements of that background understanding can be rendered explicit in certain circumstances; the background of distinctions is in conflict, not the locus of resolved questions, but a collection of conflicting goods. Reconciling conflicting or rival standards, if possible at all, comes in the form of comparing and contrasting the conflicting standards, not by searching for a common underlying property or set of properties. And so the appeal to the background as a standard is a 'rule-following' aspect of Taylor's argument not clearly understood or recognized by some of Taylor's interlocutors. That is, they are not clear on the difference between 'evaluation' (a framework that meaningfully expresses the sense of things for us) and 'articulation' (a practice of explanation and understanding). The failure to distinguish these two important concepts is part of the reason for the misunderstanding I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, namely the claim that Taylor is suggesting that by 'common understanding' we embrace or promote a homogeneous, uniform understanding. Failure to understand the distinction renders unintelligible Taylor's advocacy for a 'common language' of understanding. It is therefore necessary to survey the different uses of 'articulation' and the corresponding concept of 'retrieval'.

III.   Reconciling Conflicting Languages of Understanding

'Perspicuous Representation' and 'A Language of Perspicuous Contrast'
So far I have been arguing that for both Wittgenstein and Taylor 'understanding' is constituted by custom and convention, in the irreducible plurality of social practices and that these practices embody certain evaluative standards. We are now faced with a critical question about how to reconcile

practices and evaluative standards that conflict. How do we assess or adjudicate rival language-games or self-understandings? Once again, both Wittgenstein and Taylor employ remarkably similar strategies.

Recall that in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein describes how a particular way of looking at things can sink to a level of unquestioned background assumption and becomes an "unshakeable ideal", which we can never get outside of.[74] The failure to see anything other than the picture (what is seen) is described by Wittgenstein as 'being held captive' by a picture, as 'aspect-blindness' and as the failure to 'notice an aspect' of the picture. When we are held captive by a picture, we express our way of seeing in general terms, as an 'insight' into the essence of the phenomena.[75] Captivity means having no awareness of other possibilities, being blind to other aspects, not seeing differently. "It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off." (section I.103).

As I explained in Chapter II, Wittgenstein's preferred liberation strategy from the captivity of hegemonic pictures, his way of weaning us from the from the craving for a theory that sets forth the essential features of language, is summed up in the concept of 'perspicuous representation'. The method of perspicuous representation is an effort to bring hitherto unnoticed aspects of phenomena to our awareness, to change our "way of looking at things" (section I.144), to effect not just a change in opinion but to free us from the craving for generality, to encourage us to see the variety of aspects of a word, and the variety of words, language-games and pictures. The survey's goal of

---

74 *Philosophical Investigations*, sections 94-97, 103.

75 "We predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it. Impressed by the possibility of a comparison, we think we are perceiving a state of affairs of the highest generality." Ibid., section 104.

perspicuity is achieved by means of 'objects of comparison' and "arranging what we have always known...." (section I.109) The role of the philosopher, he argues, is not in uncovering the hidden general or essential features or rules of language but "in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (section I.127), and in helping us "...to understand something that is already in plain view...something we need to *remind* ourselves of..." (section I.89) something that "lies open to view and becomes surveyable by a rearrangement." (section I.92) In place of the conventional understanding of philosophy as a study of the most general and essential features of things, Wittgenstein challenges us to see the heterogeneity and variety of language-games related by overlapping similarities and family resemblances rather than a set of common principles. Charles Taylor employs similar strategies as these. Like Wittgenstein's concept of 'forms of life' Taylor refers to a 'background of distinctions'; like Wittgenstein concept of objects of comparison, Taylor speaks of articulation and retrieval; like Wittgenstein's concept of 'perspicuous representation' Taylor refers to a 'language of perspicuous contrast'.

Taylor argues that because language is deeply woven into our lives, our culture, our background of strong evaluations, we cannot avoid the value commitments of language. Understanding someone else, or some other culture entails using the concepts the same way they do, understanding what the agents are doing in their own terms, understanding what they see themselves as doing. But just because we cannot do without the agent's self-understanding, we do not have to therefore accept that the agent's self-understanding is central to understanding or that is it incorrigible. The 'incorrigibility' thesis is one Taylor associates with a philosophical tradition he calls "neo-Nietzschean", another variation of the monological view

mentioned earlier, which he also refers to as subjectivist and relativist.[76] The
relativist position agrees with Taylor's premise that human understanding is
embedded in human values, but they conclude from this premise that we
simply cannot separate the language of self-description from 'what is',
therefore there is no truth of the matter. As Richard Rorty explains, since
there is no description-independent truth, there is therefore no sense in
asking whether there is a 'fact of the matter'.[77]

Taylor's response to this tradition is to articulate the background of
distinctions of worth that it fails to admit. Blind to their own moral
motivations (or 'sources'), Taylor argues that relativism paradoxically
promotes an ethnocentric, anthropocentric and homogenizing worldview for
it implies that we already have the standards to make judgements about the
other. By invoking our standards to judge all civilizations and cultures, the
relativist view ends up making everyone the same.[78] It can lead to
"misunderstanding the other because he/she is interpreted as operating with
the same classification as we are."[79] Taylor rejects the claim that we can only
frame explanatory accounts in the agent's own terms or in the language of the
society we are studying; this is a variant of the monological view, what Taylor
refers to as 'vulgar Wittgensteinian'.[80] Instead what is needed is the scheme-
content distinction, and a language of contrast, which allows us to come to
understand that there is a very different way of understanding human life in
contrast to "our way of seeing things", and this means that in order to
understand the other we have to take their views seriously "as claims about

---

76 See Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth" *Philosophical Papers* 2 152-184; also:
Taylor,"Overcoming Epistemology";Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity* 56-69; Taylor,"The Politics of
Recognition" 66-69; Taylor, *Sources of the Self* section 4.2 (98-103).

77 Rorty, "Taylor on Truth" 20-33.

78 Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" 71.

79 Taylor, "Reply and Re-articulation" 221.

80 Taylor, "Understanding and Explanation" 191.

what is".[81]

This argument for a scheme or framework of understanding is not, as some relativists would claim, the search for a fixed or unitary reality, nor is it as other critics would say a defence of community-agreement or an 'essential' understanding. In fact, Taylor argues that the debate around understanding forces an impasse that 'bedevils' most students in the social sciences: either accept that the language of social explanation be or include that of the agents themselves (at the cost of relativism of the 'vulgar-Wittgensteinian' kind) or escape relativism by cleaving to an objective science, at the expense of authentic human understanding. Taylor pleads for a third approach, a form of 'realism' he refers to as "a language of perspicuous contrast." This does not need to be an arrogant and ethnocentric procedure. On the contrary,

> because we take languages of understanding seriously in regard to their value/ontological commitments, we don't need automatically to assume that ours is correct in its commitments and that foreign languages are wrong. We can, on the contrary, start with the assumption that we may learn something more about ourselves as well in coming to understand another society.[82]

Following this form of realism,

> the adequate language in which we can understand another society is not our language of understanding, or theirs, but rather what one would call a language of perspicuous contrast. This would be a language in which we could formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both.[83]

---

81 Ibid., 201.
82 Ibid., 205
83 Ibid.

It would be a language in which "the possible human variations would be so formulated that both our form of life and theirs could be perspicuously described as alternative such variations."[84] Such a language of contrast, Taylor explains, might show their language of understanding to be distorted or inadequate in some respects, or it might show ours to be so (in which case we might find that understanding them leads to an alteration of our self-understanding, and hence our form of life - a far from unknown process in history); or it might show both to be so.

The aim of understanding, Taylor argues, should not be to escape our own point of view in order to 'get inside' another. We can liberate others and "let them be" when we can identify and articulate a contrast between their understanding and ours, thereby ceasing in that respect to read them through our home understanding, and allowing them to stand apart from it on their own. But the new understanding of the other has grown beyond the home understanding: in making the contrast we have "identified, articulated, and shown to be one possibility among others, what we previously felt as a limit." The new understanding (a 'fusion of horizons') is a not a final process (it is a conversation that goes on indefinitely) and it cannot completely avoid ethnocentrism (because we are not abandoning completely our self-understanding; we are always tied to our point of view). But it is a conversation whose goal is to reach a "wider understanding which can englobe the other undistortively" a conversation where the interlocutors strive to reach a "common language, common human understanding,...which would allow both us and them undistortively to be."[85] By 'wider' and 'common' understanding, Taylor means Wittgenstein's sense of an understanding of overlapping similarities, where each participant in the

---

84 Ibid., 205-6.

85 Taylor, "Comparison, History, Truth," *Philosophical Arguments* 148-151.

language-game explores the multiplicity of similar and different uses.

The Practices of Articulation and Retrieval

Taylor's response to the neo-Nietzschean and naturalist perspectives is to evoke the concept of a dialogical background. He shows the inadequacy of the neo-Nietzschean and naturalist explanations by articulating aspects of their background assumptions and retrieving their underlying strongly valued goods, the conventions and customary practices that shape their self-understanding. In "Philosophy and its History" Taylor describes this process of 'articulation' in Wittgensteinian terms. When a self-understanding which may first have been won by a heroic effort of hyper-articulateness "comes to be the basis of widespread social practice" it may come to seem virtually unchallengeable to common sense, even though over time the original formulations (arguments), and especially their background reasons, may be neglected, "rehearsed only by specialists".[86] Taylor refers to this as being "imprisoned in a model" and captured by a picture. To be captured by a picture is to be captured "within the terms of a received 'common sense'" which holds us in virtue of being embedded in our practices. Captivity distorts, hides, displaces or discredits alternatives, "makes them look bizarre or inconceivable."[87] This hegemony of the model comes about because the model becomes the organising principle for a wide range of practices in which we think and act and deal with the world.[88] This is how "the model could sink to the level of an unquestioned background assumption." When the self-understanding (the model) is "what organizes and makes sense of so

---

86 Taylor,"Philosophy and Its History" 24.

87 Ibid., 24.

88 In the case of the epistemological model (naturalism) it became embedded "in our manner of doing natural science, in our technology, in some at least of the dominant ways in which we construe political life (the atomistic ones), later in our various ways of healing, regimenting, organizing people in society, and in other spheres too numerous to mention." Ibid., 20.

much of our lives" it cannot but appear unchallengeable at first, "and hard even to conceive alternatives to."[89]

Despite the fact that a self-understanding is given such a foundational or paradigm status, appearing to be the very essence of human understanding, escaping the picture's grasp is possible, because the diversity of our practices cannot be reduced to one self-understanding. Challenging the picture's claims to uniqueness entails seeing ʾt not as the essence of phenomena, but "as something one could come to espouse out of a creative redescription, something one could give reasons for. And this you get by retrieving the foundational formulations."[90] Seeing the picture as a one of a range of alternatives, "rather than the only way you can sensibly see things" means "recovering previous articulations that have been lost" and this means "undoing the process of forgetting", which entails 're-articulating' our actual practices.[91] This is a practice of challenging the primacy or hegemony of a conventional understanding by recovering the background assumptions implicit in the hegemonic practice - getting clear on the 'language' that the dominant practice is woven out of, articulating "...the unsaid in present practices...the good or purpose embedded in the practice."[92] What differentiates Taylor's practice of articulation from Wittgenstein's is the added emphasis on this process as an inherently historical exercise. That is "...if we want to be able to conceive of genuine alternatives to the model, then...what we need is a further reformulation...which will do justice to the alternatives...relegated to the trashcan of history...."[93] Taylor's concept of articulation entails "a further retrieval which sends us further back in

---

89 Ibid., 20-21.
90 Ibid., 20
91 Ibid., 18, 24.
92Ibid., 28.
93 Ibid.

history" to preclude being held captive by the "creative destruction of the past".[94] Articulation and retrieval revive displaced or marginalized earlier frameworks against which the prevailing dominant framework was defined.[95]

The practices of 'articulation' and 'retrieval' are explained in *Sources of the Self* in similar terms. Taylor argues here that " the moral ontology behind any person's views can remain largely implicit" and "usually does, unless there is some challenge which forces it to the fore."[96] Our qualitative contrasts are embedded in our practices, not our interpretations. When challenged, when we are "forced to spell out our claim to rightness...when we have to defend our responses as the right ones" we articulate a part of the background that "we assume and draw on in any claim to rightness".[97] We articulate by formulating what our commitments already are, what we "already implicitly but unproblematically acknowledge"[98] and what our commitments really amount to, the "ontology that is in fact the only adequate basis for our moral responses, whether we recognize this or not".[99]

Escaping the "presumption of the unique conceivability of an embedded picture" involves "taking a new stance to our practices"[100] and that entails 'undoing forgetting': instead of just living in our practices and taking their implicit construal of things as the way they are, "we have to understand how they have come to be, how they came to embed a certain view of things." In other words:

---

94 Ibid., 20.

95 Ibid., 28.

96 Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 9.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid., 10.

99 Ibid.

100 Taylor, "Philosophy and Its History" 21.

...in order to undo the forgetting, we have to articulate for ourselves how it happened, to become aware of how a picture slid from the status of discovery to that of inarticulate assumption, a fact too obvious to mention. But that means a genetic account; and one which retrieves the formulations through which the embedding in practice took place. Freeing ourselves from the presumption of uniqueness requires uncovering the origins. That is why philosophy is inescapably historical.[101]

In summary, liberation from a hegemonic picture entails retrieving some of the background assumptions embedded in our practices and comparing them to other strongly valued goods (constitutive goods, frameworks) that offer answers to the space of questions that constitute lived valued experience. This articulation-retrieval is an inescapably historical exercise because the 'original formulation' of the practice and the background reasons (the language constitutive of the practice) may be widely neglected or forgotten and because part of the reason for hegemony is displacement of earlier forgotten frameworks.

The purpose of articulation then is to challenge the primacy of a practice or escape the embeddedness of a practice. In such revolutionary periods when the dominant self-understanding (or language-game) is challenged or called into question, the activity of liberation involves retrieving some of the background distinctions (either to justify or to challenge the practice under attack). This liberation by retrieval has been a major aim of Taylor's philosophy, particularly in the polemic against naturalism and representational epistemology. In Sources of the Self and "Overcoming Epistemology", Taylor retrieves the background of strong evaluation underlying this tradition, namely the ideal of the self defined by the powers of

---

101 Ibid.

disengaged reason with its associated ideals of reflexive self-given certainty, self-responsibility and self-responsible freedom. Taylor then compares these strongly valued goods to other equally valued forms of life, to loosen the presumption of uniqueness of the naturalist picture.

There are two other ways that Taylor uses 'articulation' and 'retrieval' besides challenging the primacy of a practice. The second way is to restore a practice. That is, the purpose of articulation and retrieval is neither to wholly endorse nor to completely reject a way of life but to identify the higher ideal behind more or less debased practices and then criticize those practices from the standpoint of their own motivating ideal. In other words, instead of dismissing a practice or set of practices altogether or endorsing them completely, articulation and retrieval is meant to "raise its practice by making more palpable to its participants what the ethic they subscribe to really involves."[102] An example in Taylor's work of this type of retrieval is his attempt to identify the higher ideal behind the individualism of self-fulfilment and the politics of universal dignity; in *Sources of the Self, Malaise of Modernity* and "The Politics of Recognition", Taylor criticizes these practices from the standpoint of their own motivating ideal, the 'ethic of authenticity' and restores the practice (the ethic of authenticity) from its debased manifestations. This task is achieved by retrieving some of the historical assumptions underlying this ideal such as the affirmation of ordinary life and the romantic expressivist ideas of nature as an inner moral source.

The final way in which articulation and retrieval are used (and this has been alluded to earlier) is to reach an understanding or agreement. When misunderstanding occurs as a result of a conflict of strong evaluations, as a

---

102 Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity* 72.

result of, for example, being brought up in different cultures, the practice of articulation can play a key role. In "To Follow a Rule" Taylor argues that "if misunderstanding stems from a difference of background, what needs to be said has the effect of articulating some aspect of the explainer's background that may never before have been articulated."[103] That is, when reconciliation is sought, the first step is to accept the other in their own terms and then compare and contrast the background of distinctions that ground each other's self understanding. The aim of articulation here is mutual transformation through dialogue and persuasion.[104] An example of this from of retrieval is seen in "The Politics of Recognition" and in Taylor's articles on the Canadian constitutional conflict where he draws out the underlying background of distinctions of Quebecers and Canadians outside Quebec, in an effort to reconcile those differences. Unlike other proposals, Taylor's suggestion is not to search for an underlying universal principle (such as equal dignity or equal value) nor "uniformitarian" documents such as a charter of rights, nor definitive principles such as a distinct society clause or alternatively the equality of provinces. His solution is to search not for likeness and unity, some global or over-arching formula or purpose but a common purpose grounded in an ongoing recognition of pluralism, like a conversation among people recognized as different.[105] In the "Preface" to *Philosophical Arguments* Taylor tells us that instead of speaking of the political culture of 'modernity',

> ...we should speak instead of "alternative modernities", different ways of living the political and economic structures that the contemporary age makes mandatory. How these are worked out in India will not be the same as Japan, which is in turn different from the North Atlantic region— which in its turn again has much inner diversity.

---

103 Taylor, "To Follow a Rule" 169.

104 See Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity* Chapter VII.

105 See Taylor, "Reply and Re-articulation" 255.

An important factor in the modern world is cultural borrowing. Although this has always been a feature of human life, today its rate and scale are unprecedented. Still it doesn't follow that what is borrowed will be a carbon copy of the original. In most cases it plainly is not. This means that finding a language for cultural diversity is partly finding a language for alternative modernities; or finding a way of understanding that makes room for these alternatives....[106]

The import point here, a point that many of Taylor's interlocutors miss is that Taylor's use of 'common' (as in common purpose, understanding, language) is neither unitary nor fixed nor is it like an explicitly-agreed premise. Taylor's proposal for the reconciliation of differences is not to uncritically affirm the authority of our common institutions, traditions and practices. The language of perspicuous contrast, and its tools of 'articulation' and 'retrieval', is not used to simply affirm an existing way of seeing things but can also be invoked to call into question the background assumptions that inform a way of life or to restore other backgrounds of distinction, other strongly valued goods, that may be lost, forgotten, ignored or suppressed.

The concept of 'strong-evaluation' or a 'background of distinctions', is therefore used differently from 'articulation' and 'retrieval'. The background of distinctions is the conventional understanding, the 'form of life' that is valued above others, the inescapable condition of existence. To 'articulate' or 'retrieve' aspects of a form of life are practices undertaken for a specific purposes: they are practices of liberation (to help free us from a dominant way of looking at things), justification (restoring a practice or picture that it informs) and reconciliation (reaching understanding). So 'articulation' is a practice of understanding that we engage when we are held captive by a picture and we want to escape its presumptions of uniqueness, or it is a step to

---

106 Taylor, "Preface" *Philosophical Arguments* xi-xiii.

help us overcome misunderstanding. Articulation is not the essence of human understanding nor is it the fundamental way in which we understand the world around us. Rather, as I mentioned earlier, Taylor argues that "the basic way in which we acknowledge and mark the things that are important to us in the human context is through what we call social practices."[107] Taylor means that the ways we regularly behave to/before each other embody some understanding between us and allows of discrimination of right/wrong, appropriate/inappropriate. Such social practices "can be largely inarticulate" in the sense that the practice incorporates our discriminations: "the good, the value embodied in a practice, its point or purpose, may not be formulated."[108] The valuing we do as human beings is not always a conscious explicit activity. What things are valued is implied in our background.

Taylor's language of perspicuous contrast allows us to avoid the self-delusion of thinking that we do not speak from a moral orientation which we take to be right (a pitfall of some neo-Nietzschean and naturalist views) and is meant for the kind of intercultural understanding where both sides can feel that their background distinctions are not being distorted, ignored or undermined. The language of perspicuous contrast refers to a negotiated conditional intercultural reconciliation, a common understanding of contrast, not of definitive uniformity. Taylor points out that this language of perspicuous contrast "is obviously very close to Gadamer's conception of the 'fusion of horizons' and owes a great deal to it" and he is clear that his way of thinking

---

107 Taylor, "Philosophy and its History" 22.

108 Ibid."We have a gamut of articulateness. At the bottom, there is the case where no descriptive words are used at all...Now the inarticulate end of this gamut us somehow primary. That is we are introduced into the goods, and inducted into the purposes of our society much more and earlier through its inarticulate practices than through formulations" Ibid., 23. Compare this to Wittgenstein's claim that giving grounds, justifying the evidence, comes to an end,"it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of a language-game." Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, section 204.

on these has been much influenced by Gadamer.[109] I hope it is clear how this language of contrast is also a particular example of Wittgenstein's concept of a "perspicuous representation". Taylor admits as much when he states in "Understanding and Explanation" that his form of realism "has learnt...from non-vulgar Wittgensteinianism."[110]

The distinction between 'strong evaluation'—the inarticulate background practices that shape us—and the practice of 'articulating' our background distinctions is missed by some of Taylor's interlocutors.[111] The mistake of conflating the two concepts leads to the equally mistaken belief that by articulating the background distinctions (the norms) that ground our practices, Taylor is simply endorsing uncritically those norms, or that he is proposing that they serve as essential principles grounding our differences or that he is affirming as reconciling principles, ones that are deeply conservative.[112] What these criticisms miss is that our background distinctions of worth are ways of life, ethics, standards that constitute and motivate our capacities; they are already-accepted distinctions by which we

---

109 Taylor, "Understanding and Explanation" 206; Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" 67; Taylor, "Comparison, History, Truth" 148.

110 "Understanding and Explanation" 205.

111 Daniel Weinstock for example, understands strong evaluation to mean a capacity to articulate or deliberate practically and considers it a condition of acting out a strong evaluation that one has articulated and critically reflected on that strong evaluation. He refers to strong evaluation as the "articulation and refinement of a particular good", a "perspicuous articulation of the goods toward which" one draws ones feelings, a practice whereby a person is "self-consciously engaged in the process of searching for increasingly perspicuous articulations of the goods to which one's feelings and desires are a response." Weinstock "The Political Theory of Strong Evaluation" 174, 175-176. But strong evaluations are not individual human capacities, nor is it a condition of strong evaluation that it be rendered explicit and critically reflected on.

112 Consider for example how Quentin Skinner rebukes Taylor for suggesting that we must 'affirm' our conceptions of the good and 'embrace' our inherited way s of life even if they "betray our interests and threaten our liberties." Skinner mistakenly believes that Taylor is suggesting that despite the barbarism of the present century "the proper view to take of our own moral evolution must be strongly affirmative." Skinner, "Modernity and Disenchantment" 42.

judge our desires, inclinations, choices, practices; they are "the standards by which other, ordinary goods are judged".[113] Strong evaluations are not community-agreements or justifications of existing traditions or norms, but are the practice-frameworks we invent to give our lives 'sense'. Strong evaluations are our forms of life, they are the norms or rules that constitute our practices, giving them sense. Taylor uses 'evaluation' to mean a condition of experience, a framework that makes the world around us meaningful and intelligible.

> Frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements, intuitions, or reactions....To articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses. That is, when we try to spell out what it is that we presuppose when we judge that a certain form of life is truly worthwhile, or place our dignity in a certain achievement or status, or define our moral obligations in a certain manner, we find ourselves articulating inter alia what I have been calling here 'frameworks'.[114]

In response to Daniel Weinstock who conflates evaluation and articulation Taylor writes: "I don't consider it a condition of acting out a strong evaluation that one has articulated and critically reflected on one's framework....I mean simply that one is operating with a sense that some desires, goals, aspirations are qualitatively higher than others."[115] This idea that we operate with a 'sense' of qualitative distinctions is spelled out clearly in the *Sources of the Self*, when Taylor distinguishes the warrior-citizen ethic (the ethic of virtue, to be found in public life or in excelling in the warrior agon) and against this the counter-position put forward by Plato, that the higher life is ruled by

---

113 See Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 4, 20, 34, 35, 65, 122, 336-37. Some of the 'strong evaluations' Taylor retrieves are the ethics of honour, self-mastery, transformation of the will, expressivism and the affirmation of ordinary life.

114 Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 26.

115 Taylor, "Reply and Re-articulation" 249.

reason (a vision of order in the cosmos and the soul).[116] Plato's ethic requires what we would call today a 'theory', a reasoned account of what human life is about, and why one way is higher than others. This flows inescapably from the new moral status of reason. But the background within which we act and judge doesn't need to be articulated theoretically. "It isn't usually by those who live by the warrior ethic. They share certain discriminations: what is honourable and dishonouring, what is admirable, what is done and not done." Taylor describes this as knowing "how to behave v.rithout ever being told the rules."[117] Rules, discriminations, reside in customary social practices.

That is what Taylor means when he speaks of acting within a background or framework as functioning with a 'sense' of qualitative distinction. A framework can only be an inarticulate norm, embedded in practice, or it can be articulated or retrieved — spelled out in a highly explicit way, in a philosophically formulated ontology or anthropology.[118] Like Wittgenstein's claim that rules reside in ongoing customary use, Taylor does not conclude from the fact that some people operate without a philosophically defined framework that they are quite without a framework at all. Taylor claims that this is always untrue:

> For like our inarticulate warriors, their lives may be entirely structured by supremely important qualitative distinctions, in relation to which they literally live and die. This will be evident enough in the judgement calls they make on their own and others' action. But it may be entirely up to us, observers, historians, philosophers, anthropologists, to try to formulate explicitly what goods, qualities, or ends are here discriminated. It is this level of inarticulacy, at which we often function, that I try to speak of when I speak of the 'sense' of a

---

116 Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 20.

117 Ibid., 21.

118 "In the case of some frameworks, it may be optional whether one formulates [qualitative distinctions] or not. But in other cases, the nature of the framework demands it, as with Plato, or seems to forbid it, as with the warrior-citizen ethic he attacked." Ibid.

qualitative distinction.[119]

Like Wittgenstein's celebrated rule-following claims in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Taylor here is arguing that we can give definition to the rules implicit in our practices ("we can draw a boundary - for a special purpose") but it is a mistake to assume that our practices are meaningful only when they are so-defined: "Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose)."[120] As 'Vittgenstein writes, even though the application of a word, or a game, is not everywhere circumscribed, or bounded by clear rules, this does not mean that its use, the game, is unregulated. We know how to follow a rule and play a game because of our ongoing participation in the game or the practice in which the rule is customarily used. Our participation in the practice means that we inherit a background against which we can distinguish between correct and incorrect rule-following, between true and false.

Taylor makes specific reference to this important argument[121] and specifically to *Philosophical Investigations*, section 87, where Wittgenstein argues that an explanation (what Taylor calls articulation) is not what grounds our self-understanding. This important Wittgensteinian aspect of the Taylorian argument is not clearly recognized by Taylor's interlocutors many of whom do not see that strong evaluations are not always explicit, but are always inarticulate, embedded in practice. The other more crucial claim Taylor makes is that modernity is marked by a new kind of inarticulacy, that of denial of frameworks and background distinctions altogether. Articulation, therefore is not what grounds our identity (our self, self-understanding) but serves a

---

119 Ibid.

120 *Philosophical Investigations*, section 69.

121 See Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 34,35,38.

specific purpose, as Wittgenstein explains in Section 87, "to remove or to avert a misunderstanding—one, that is that would occur but for the explanation...."

What some of Taylor's interlocutors miss is the distinction Taylor draws between the inescapable background and the practice of articulating and retrieving that background. 'Articulation', 'historical retrieval', 'creative redescription', 'perspicuous redescription', 'uncovering origins', 'formulating what is unsaid', are practices that occur when our background distinctions (our framework) is called into question, is challenged, or when it collides with a rival culture. These practices are not the same as strong evaluation. Articulation is a practice of understanding but 'strong evaluation' refers to a conventional understanding, or a rule that we obey and go against in actual cases. These practices of retrieval-articulation strongly resemble and are influenced by Wittgenstein's technique of 'perspicuous representation', a technique and influence apparent in many other philosophers of the late twentieth century including Quentin Skinner and Thomas Kuhn, whose work I will survey in the proceeding chapters .

IV.   Conclusion

Charles Taylor is conventionally read as a deeply conservative 'communitarian' philosopher who grounds morality and politics in the community, affirms and uncritically accepts the authority of our inherited institutions and practices, and endorses a unitary common good. This 'communitarian' interpretation is called into question, and replaced with a dialogical reading of Taylor where human understanding is grounded not in 'the community' but in the continuing conversation and the ongoing struggle to negotiate with others recognized as different. This dialogical reading is made perspicuous by retrieving aspects of the philosophy of Ludwig

Wittgenstein, whose arguments about 'language-games' and rule-following strongly influence Taylor's philosophical position. Like Wittgenstein's account of language-games, Taylor claims that language is woven into a range of social practices of dialogical exchange, and that our identities are shaped by these dialogical relationships.

The incorrect reading of Taylor is based in part on a blindness to these Wittgensteinian aspects and in part on a number of conceptual misunderstandings: what Taylor means by a 'common understanding' and the concepts of 'strong evaluation' (or the 'background of distinctions') and 'articulation' (or 'retrieval'). The concept 'strong evaluation' refers to a standard, a moral or motivating ideal, a way of life, such as the ethic of authenticity, the affirmation of ordinary life, inwardness. The concept of 'articulation' refers to a practice of making apparent some aspects of the strong evaluation: in order to identify the higher ideal behind more or less debased practices (such as the ethic of authenticity), in order to call into question our practices, such as naturalism and neo-Nietzschean relativism, and in order to reconcile differences, and reach an understanding, such as with the Québec-Canada impasse. The technique Taylor proposes to pursue these three goals of articulation is, like Wittgenstein, a perspicuous contrast: comparing and contrasting aspects of the background understanding that ground the conflicting practices and the different and similar uses of concepts. In this sense, Taylor is a philosopher of plurality, not community. What the 'communitarian' interpretation misses is Taylor's crucial claim that human identities are constituted in the ongoing practices of dialogue, in the activities of giving reasons, seeking mutual understanding and agreement and going on differently. The accounts which focus on 'community' cannot explain these Taylorian paradigm activities of identity-formation and understanding, such as exchanging reasons with a significant other, in a political discussion,

in a seminar or at a meeting. The 'community' view misses how understanding, reconciling differences, is an activity engaged in with others who see things differently. It is a game in which there are many different possibilities, a labyrinth of paths.

Wittgenstein's philosophy allows us to understand how Taylor proposes to reconcile the seemingly incommensurable plurality of cultures, values and conceptual frameworks, through a common understanding that recognizes and makes room for different cultures and ways of life. Taylor's form of reconciliation is not the embodiment of a single all-embracing principle of politics or morality from which everything can be deduced (such as the community); nor is Taylor suggesting that intercultural reconciliation can be achieved if we all simply embrace our inherited customs and traditions, or affirm some universal good. Taylor's proposal for reconciliation begins from the position that we are deeply motivated by conflicting standards but a common understanding, reconciliation, is possible in ongoing dialogue. Such a common understanding is similar to Wittgenstein's claim that what unites the variety of language-games is not uniformity, but family resemblances, a complicated network of overlapping criss-crossing similarities. For Taylor, reconciliation can be achieved conditionally, and in a mutually non-distortive manner, in a continuing conversation, negotiation and persuasion in which the differences and similarities are compared among people recognized as different.

CHAPTER IV

Quentin Skinner: History as an 'Object of Comparison' and The Text as a Technique of Persuasion

---

I.   Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the various areas of similarity in the philosophical approaches of Charles Taylor and the later writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein: there is an irreducible plurality of self-understandings, practices or forms of life; these self-understanding are rule-governed in the sense that they embody conventional standards of evaluation; acceptance of these entails neither that rational assessment of conflicting, rival or uncombinable practices is not possible nor that one must accept the incorrigibility and incomparability of the multiplicity of practices; human understanding is possible in ongoing practice in ongoing comparison and contrast, negotiation, conversation, dialogue not by having a general or a comprehensive theory that unites the variety of conversations.

I argued that Taylor's position is partly shaped by a distinctive reading of Wittgenstein's later writings: one that is neither conservative nor relativist. The reading is not conservative because Taylor argues that understanding is not like being trained into a unitary agreed-to rule or being conditioned into community-based conventional practices, it is not like singing in unison, but rooted in a multiplicity of different and similar uses - 'obeying a rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases. This position is not relativist because the absence of a general theory or culturally-invariant principle does not entail that conflicting self-understandings or evaluative languages are incorrigible and incomparable, that we must simply appeal to the authority of a tradition, convention or practice.

This chapter will examine another example of this distinctive reading of

Wittgenstein's later writings, that offered by Quentin Skinner. It is may aim to show similarities between the approaches of Skinner and Wittgenstein and between those of Skinner and Taylor. This is not to say that there are no differences between Skinner and Taylor. Indeed there is much grounds for disagreement between them, including the ways they read Wittgenstein.[1] I am not the first to notice the connection between Skinner and Wittgenstein. James Tully has already noted how "the horizon and general orientation" of Skinner's work is furnished by an approach put forward by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*.[2] My aim is to examine this general orientation and compare it to Wittgenstein's writings, to show how Skinner employs Wittgenstein's techniques as tools to explain the relationship between the past and present. In so doing I intend to show, contrary to his critics[3], that: Skinner's views about interpretation and their methodological implications are in fact constructed out of epistemologically sound materials; that the philosophical understanding from which Skinner draws his arguments about the process of historical interpretation is tenable. And that this self-understanding does not commit one to a conservative political philosophy.

---

1 For example, Skinner's reading of Wittgenstein is influenced by J.L. Austin's speech-act theory, and is used as a method by which to study the history of ideas, that is, historical inquiries into intellectual problems. Meanwhile, Taylor situates his reading of the *Philosophical Investigations* within the Kantian tradition of 'an argument from transcendental conditions', where the adequacy of an explanation is argued from what is shown to be the indispensable conditions of there being anything like experience or awareness of the world in the first place. Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology" 473. Taylor's comparison to Kant is not necessarily one that Wittgenstein would have objected to. Ray Monk explains that in 1932, when he devoted all his energy to producing a presentation of his new thoughts, the period now recognized as when he began to formulate the ideas for which he would later be known, Wittgenstein lectured on the Western philosophical tradition using C.D. Broad's own series of undergraduate lectures, "Elements of Philosophy". Of Kant' critical method he said: "This is the right sort of approach." Monk, *Duty of Genius* 319-22.

2 Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword" 8.

3 See Skinner "A Reply to My Critics" 235.

II. "Words are Deeds"

In "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas"[4] Quentin Skinner holds up for scrutiny two approaches to historiography: textualism and contextualism. The two approaches are "orthodox answers" Skinner claims to "the basic question which necessarily arises whenever an historian of ideas confronts a work which he hopes to understand" namely "what are the appropriate procedures to adopt in the attempt to arrive at an understanding of the work?" Textualism is premised on a belief that the text contains timeless elements, universal ideas, dateless wisdom, fundamental concepts, a definitive or essential (original) meaning and the task of the historian of ideas is to retrieve the original true meaning of a text, the unbroken continuity of forgotten things, the historically invariant principle. The essential (true) meaning of the concepts employed by the author is given or fixed by their sense and reference. The references of the text are the objects for which its concepts stand, what the objects designate. The sense of the text, the substance of the arguments contained in the texts, is determined by the ideological context itself - the text in relation to other available texts. Therefore the textualists argue that the text is a self-sufficient object of inquiry; it is possible to understand utterances and hence interpret texts in the absence of understanding the social context.[5]

The contextualist thesis is based on the premise that meaning is 'caused' by the context, that knowing the cause (the necessary and sufficient condition of the occurrence) of an action is equivalent to an understanding (and an explanation) of the action itself, its meaning[6]; furthermore, social contexts are antecedent causal determinants of the ideas of a given author. Therefore the

4 Reprinted in Tully ed., *Meaning and Context,* 29-67.
5 Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding" 55-56.
6 Ibid., 30.

contextualist thesis concludes that social contexts in themselves determine the meaning of the text.7

Skinner replies to these two orthodox methods by arguing that examining either the text itself or its social context are insufficient for understanding and furthermore these methodologies rest on fundamental mistakes: textualism a mistake about 'essential' meaning, contextualism a mistake about the nature of the relationship between the author's intention and the action of the written word: it privileges causal explanation over explanation by purpose. Both approaches ignore how a language of explanation is inseparable from an evaluation and is inseparable from the subjects, theories or social reality it is trying to explain. The textualist thesis fails to recognize that the meaning of an utterance is fixed neither by what the words refer to or denote nor by the word's role in the sentence or in relation to other available vocabulary because the words denoting an idea may be used with varying and quite incompatible uses, because the meaning of a concept is diverse.

Furthermore even if the context fixes the sense of the utterance - its linguistic meaning or the substance of the argument itself - it alone cannot uniquely fix the meaning nor resolve ambiguities in reference, since the context is capable of yielding a variety of alternative of senses or the sense may itself be a variety of possible interpretations. One also needs insight into the purpose of linguistic actions, the author's intentions, her point in writing, the 'illocutionary force' of the text — something causal contextual explanations cannot provide. Therefore Skinner advises us that rather than study social context as a causal explanation, social context should be examined for its

---

7 Ibid., 61.

insights into the purpose of the action for the agent who performed it.[8]

Skinner's alternative approach, his response to textualism and causal contextual explanation, is a form of historical explanation which is non-causal, which attempts to retrieve the author's intention, which is to say the point in writing the text. This is non-causal because it explains the linguistic action in terms of the ideological point and not in terms of an independently specifiable condition, a general law or theory, a hypothetical-deductive model, a necessary and sufficient condition, a culturally-invariant all-embracing method or some other search for essence. The very idea that there is an 'essential' meaning of a text which remains the same or which writers contribute at all, is a mistake. Therefore the very project of looking for such a meaning by way of a general theory or historically-invariant explanation is simply mistaken.

This distinctive historiography is deeply influenced by the lessons of the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is a way of doing history in which "we must study all the various situations which may change in complex ways, in which the given form of words can logically be used - all the functions the words can serve, all the various things that can be done with them."[9] Citing sections 43

---

8 Ibid., 59. It is noteworthy that both Taylor and Skinner share an early commitment to "explanation by purpose".

9 Ibid., 55. Skinner's response to textualism and his understanding of Wittgenstein is heavily influenced by J.L.Austin who Skinner claims introduced "refinements...into Wittgenstein's suggested analysis of 'meaning' in terms of 'the use of words'". Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics" 260. Skinner claims that Austin's speech-act theory "provides us with a convenient way of making a point of fundamental importance about the understanding of utterances and hence the interpretation of texts." Ibid., 260. The theory reminds us that, if we wish to understand any serious utterance, we need to be able to grasp something over and above the sense and reference of the terms used to express it. "To cite Austin's own formula, we need in addition to find a means of recovering what the agent may have been *doing* in saying what was said, and hence of understanding what the agent may have meant by issuing an utterance with just that sense and reference."Ibid. See also J.L. Austin, "Performative-Constative" *The Philosophy of Language*, ed. J.R. Searle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) 13-22.

and 79 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Skinner claims that the "appropriate, and famous, formula" is that we should look for not the essential or fixed meanings of words, "but their use."[10] Skinner turns to Wittgenstein's remarks as a "classic statement" of his own alternative methodological commitments.[11] A proper historical understanding is an ongoing and aspectival process in which we grasp what point a given expression might have had for the agents who use it, "what range of uses the expression itself could sustain."[12] Skinner describes his use-based, practical historiography as follows:

> ...as soon as we see that there *is* no determinate idea to which various writers contributed but only a variety statements made with the words by a variety of different agents with a variety of intentions, then what we are seeing is equally that history of ideas must focus on the various agents who used the ideas and on their varying situations and intentions for using them.[13]

The continuing process of understanding an author means surveying a multiplicity of ways in which a variety of words are used. Like an anthropologist's attempt at understanding an alien culture and a philosopher's attempt to understand an unfamiliar conceptual scheme[14], the historian understands the past in conversation or dialogue between one's

---

10 Ibid.

11 See Ibid., footnote 154 page 300: "For the classic statement of this commitment, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* ...esp. Para. 43; and for its application as a means of attacking the idea of fixed meanings,see esp. para. 79 *et seq.* "

12 Ibid., 56.

13 Ibid., 56.

14 Skinner "Meaning and Understanding", 45.

own "preconceived paradigms"[15] and another unfamiliar or rival language, self-understanding or conceptual scheme. This is a dialogical epistemology in that making sense of a statement or action must include and make use of a range of descriptions that the other agent could have used to describe and classify his own actions.[16] The key to understanding such actions is to examine the use of words: to see as Skinner puts it, "the nature of all the occasions and activities - the language games - within which it might appear...."[17]

Skinner's reference to Wittgenstein's celebrated concept of the language game is a clear indication of the important place of the *Philosophical Investigations* in his early writings. Like Wittgenstein, Skinner's historical surveys highlight a crucial feature of human understanding: that we understand the meaning of a word by actually using it in ongoing customary practice, by " 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases"[18] by using the language in new and innovative ways, acquiring the range of normative abilities to use a concept in various contexts.

Skinner's approach illustrates the practical nature of language not merely as a description of human activity but something inextricably interwoven in human actions and values: speech is also action, to say something is always and *eo ipso* to do something. Skinner invokes the 'language-games'

---

15 Ibid., 48. The use of this Kuhnian vocabulary is not coincidental. Skinner acknowledges his debt to Kuhn's works in a number of articles. See for example Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" 32; Skinner,"'Social Meaning' and the Explanation of Social Action'," *Meaning and Context*, ed. Tully, 92-93; and Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics" 236 (footnote 22 page 328), 250, 257. Kuhn reciprocates the acknowledgement, recognizing Skinner as an historian "whose concerns overlap my own." Kuhn, "Mathematical Versus Experimental Traditions in the Development of Physical Science," *The Essential Tension* 31 n.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 55.

18 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, section 201.

argument to illustrate why it is a mistake to look for the common, general or essential features of history that could be discovered once and for all. Instead the languages of history must be seen as a diverse collection or multiplicity of tools with different functions, a complicated network, an ancient city with a maze of little streets and squares, old and new houses and multitude of neighbourhoods, a labyrinth of paths.[19]

Skinner appeals to this very powerful Wittgensteinian framework to challenge the supremacy of positivist methods of history with their unitary and causal claims.[20] He credits Wittgenstein with a "central insight" about 'use' claiming that it is "most economically conveyed by [the] remark that 'words are also deeds'."[21] This reference to section 546 of the *Philosophical Investigations* is of such fundamental importance to Skinner that he uses it and a similar remark "words are deeds"[22] as a quotation prefixed to the publication *Meaning and Context Quentin Skinner and his Critics* and as the methodological framework of his recent publication *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* in which Skinner attempts to "take seriously the implications of the fact that, as Wittgenstein puts it in *Philosophical Investigations*, 'words are also deeds.'"[23]

---

19 Ibid., Part I., sections 11 - 12, 18, 23, 203.

20 That is not to say that Skinner rejects causal explanations. His point is that there are also non causal explanations of human action. Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics" 266.

21 Ibid., 260.

22 Wittgenstein *Culture and Value* 46e.

23 Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 8. From Austin Skinner distinguishes two ways that words can be deeds: what one may bring about 'by saying' something (perlocutionary utterances) and what one may be doing 'in saying' something,(the intended force, corresponding to the 'illocutionary' act being performed by the agent in issuing a given utterance). As Skinner puts it, "Austin's central contention is that any agent, in issuing any serious utterance, will be doing something as well as merely saying something, and will be doing something *in* saying what he says, and not merely as a consequence of what is said." Skinner, " 'Social Meaning' and the Explanation of Social Action" 83. To understand fully the historical meaning of a text it is not sufficient to understand its locutionary meaning, the author's intention 'to write' (where the intention precedes the action) but it is also

The way in which Skinner attempts to take seriously the implication that words are deeds is to exhibit the dynamic nature of the relationship which exists between the professed principles and actual practices of political life, that is, between the linguistic or ideological context (thought) and the practical context (action).[24] This means that to understand a text is not just to recapture the locutionary or linguistic meaning but also "why its contents are as they are and not otherwise "[25] As Skinner writes:

> We need, that is, to be able to give an account of what [the writer] was *doing* in presenting his argument: what set of conclusions, what course of action, he was supporting or defending, attacking or repudiating, ridiculing with irony, scorning with polemical silence, and so on and on through the entire gamut of speech-acts embodied in the vastly complex act of intended communication that any work of discursive reasoning may be said to comprise.[26]

---

necessary to 'secure uptake' of the illocutionary force of the author's utterances, the author's intention 'in writing' the text , his point (where the intention is logically connected to the action) The locutionary meaning (the sense and reference) of past practices can be secured by situating author/text in his/its linguistic or ideological context - what an author is or was 'doing' in writing a text in relation to other available texts.The locutionary context is the collection of texts written or used in the same periods, addressed to the same or similar issues and sharing a number of conventions. The author's illocutionary force (intention) can be secured by situating the author in his or her practical (political) context: the point of the text in relation to available and problematic political action. Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword" 7. The "key" to the latter is "to compare how the relevant political action is rendered by the conventions of the ideology with how it is redescribed by the manipulation of these conventions in the given text." Ibid., 11. The practical context concerns the political problems of the age to which the political theorist is responding. Tully tells us that the locutionary meaning asks about the character of the text as an ideological manoeuvre (what is an author doing ideologically?) and the illocutionary force asks about the character of the ideological manoeuvre as a political manoeuvre (what is an author doing in manipulating the available ideological conventions?) Ibid., 10. Tully's important clarification is that Skinner distinguishes: (a) the ideological and political point(s) of a text relative to available conventions and (b) the author's ideological and political point(s) in writing it. Ibid., 10, 12.

24 Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding" 56-9 and Skinner "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action" *Meaning and Context*, ed. Tully, 108.

25 Skinner, "The Idea of Negative Liberty" 201.

26 Ibid.

Skinner begins with the Wittgensteinian observation that use, our customary practices and conventions, are what lie at the foundation of modern social and political thought.[27] And the histories that Skinner specifically explains are the ways in which relations of power and war ground modern practices of political thought.[28] However, Skinner also accepts the hermeneutical convention of the constitutive role of language (ideology), in negative form, rejecting the view that the practitioner's language of description (ideology) has no influence on practice itself. [29]Although the practical context is primary, the ideological context is not wholly superstructural - it in turn affects the base.[30]

Skinner's interest as an historian is to examine and explain those periods in history where prevailing social and political conventions are rendered problematic because of practical conflict or war. In such cases the production of a text is crucially significant in the historical explanation because the text helps constitute and characterize the ideological context. Because the ideological context is not wholly superstructural, the text must be read as "action in context", as a technique of persuasion, as an attempt by the author to "reinforce or change his ideological context, strengthen or weaken rival elements of it, preserve a certain form of it intact against assault, or on the contrary give it a new twist or direction."[31] Political theories are about contemporaneous legitimation crises caused by shifting political relations because the language in which they are written serves to characterize political

---

27 Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword" 24.

28"The primary agent of large-scale change in both thought and action is the unstable configuration of power relations that make up the practical context, and which the ideological controversy represents." Ibid., 15. Tully adds, that for Skinner "it is practical conflict and war that lie at the foundation of modern political thought...." Ibid., 24.

29 Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword" 23.

30 Ibid., 15.

31 Charles Taylor, "The Hermeneutics of Conflict," Meaning and Context, ed. Tully, 219.

relations.[32] In this sense, social and political theories are "justifications of the alterations or reinforcement of use-governing conventions"[33], they are "weapons of vindication or subversion", characterizing or re-evaluating the political situation they represent, legitimizing a new range of activity or belief, or delegitimizing or reenforcing the status quo.[34]

Does Skinner's anti-essentialist historiography lay the groundwork for a relativist rationality? That is, is Skinner insulating questions of historical explanation from those of truth?[35] One of the questions Skinner is concerned with is how the historian can evaluate the precise character of the social and political theories expressed in various texts.[36] This is a difficult task indeed because "an ideology is only a very rough guide to the forms of life it characterizes" and "a worst guide to what is actually going on" because "components of the (languages) ideologies are adjusted to mask and disguise as customary forms of action what would otherwise be considered unreasonable, immoral or illegal."[37] The great texts are often classics "because they challenge the commonplaces of the period."[38]

Despite these difficulties, Skinner insists that we can evaluate the precise character of the theory (revolutionary and conventional) and we can understand the precise role of epistemology in relation to the author's political thought by asking questions about what an author is doing and seeking the answers by relating the author's work to the prevailing

---

32 Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword" 13-14.
33 Ibid., 13.
34 Ibid., 13-14.
35 Taylor, "The Hermeneutics of Conflict" 223.
36 Skinner, "Analysis of Political Thought and Action" 104.
37 Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword" 23.
38 Ibid., 13.

conventions of political argument at the time.[39] It is this complex relationship between use, convention and the possibility of evaluation that renders Skinner's approach neither relativist nor objectivist, but aspectival in the sense articulated by Wittgenstein. I will now examine these three aspects showing their connection to Wittgenstein's later writings: Wittgenstein's remarks about grammar (an examination of the range of vocabulary and their uses), convention (how concepts are situated in convention-governed contexts) and dialogue (how understanding occurs between convention-governed contexts).

Philosophical 'Grammar'

In section 90 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein calls his investigation "grammatical" which is an analysis that sheds light on a problem "by clearing misunderstandings away". Such misunderstandings concern "the use of words" by which Wittgenstein means not just how we use language but also "*the kind of statement* that we make about phenomena."[40] Here Wittgenstein is calling into question a conventional philosophical method of making sense of the world which is "an urge to understand the basis, or essence, of everything empirical."[41] The question about what is the essence of phenomena is a 'picture' that holds that before we can understand any phenomena we must develop a general theory which explains its essential features. In his lectures, Wittgenstein explained that he was not offering a philosophical theory, but rather was calling into question the need for theory. As Ray Monk remarks in his excellent summary of Wittgenstein's life and works, "what replaces theory is *grammar.*"[42]

---

39 Skinner, "Analysis of Political Thought and Action" 104.

40See also *Philosophical Investigations* Part I sections 199, 392, 492, 496–497.

41 Ibid., section 89.

42 Monk, *Duty of Genius* 322. Monk meticulously summarizes the development of Wittgenstein's idea of philosophical grammar in chapters 13 and 14.

As I explained in Chapter II, the alternative to theory-building is outlined in section 122 of the *Philosophical Investigations,* where Wittgenstein explains the concept of 'perspicuous representation' or the 'survey' — a technique that shows by way of 'objects of comparison' how we are grounded in a variety of conventional self-understandings joined by a complicated network of similarities and differences overlapping and criss-crossing. Rather than constructing a general theory to unite this polysemy of meanings, Wittgenstein urges us to see the family resemblances in all the various uses. Rather than assuming that a concept must have a definite common use in all possible cases, Wittgenstein encourages us to see the connections, the differences and similarities, among particular cases and examples.

There are in fact many overall similarities and similarities of details when we compare Skinner's and Wittgenstein's remarks on grammar or use. In his "The Idea of Negative Liberty", Skinner's describes his historical Wittgensteinian approach as follows:

> ...to explicate a concept...is to give an account of the meanings of the terms habitually used to express it. And to understand the meanings of such terms...is a matter of understanding their correct usage, of grasping what can and cannot be said and done with them. So far so good; or rather, so far so Wittgensteinian, which I am prepared to suppose amounts in these matter to the same thing.[43]

Overall, Skinner's approach is one of a survey of the "gradual emergence of the vocabulary of modern political thought."[44] Like Wittgenstein, Skinner's aim is to use objects of comparison, in this case recovering "discarded

---

[43] Skinner, "The Idea of Negative Liberty" 198.

[44] See Skinner *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought,* vols. I & II back cover of paperback edition. Cited in Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword" 17.

traditions of thought";[45] recovering the variety of things that "have been said and done with"[46] a concept at earlier phases in the history of western culture in order to "supplement and correct" prevailing and misleading restricted senses of what "can and cannot be said and done"[47] with various concepts of social and political philosophy. Skinner's aim is to invoke the past as an object of comparison. This comparative analogical use of history as comparison is a way of "questioning rather than underpinning our current beliefs" and allows us to see our present practices differently - ιο show us how a concept we take for granted "has been put to unfamiliar but coherent uses."[48]

The similarities to Wittgenstein are even more apparent in detail. Skinner identifies the way an 'appraisive vocabulary' is used by human agents and how their manipulation of this vocabulary illustrates the artificial distinction between social reality and the language of description of that social reality. In other words linguistic debates, debates that arise over the use of terms, are debates about the application of "our appraisive vocabulary to our social world" and so are debates about substantive social issues. Appraisive terms, or 'evaluative-descriptive' terms[49], are terms like nature, democracy, originality, being, courageous, exploitation, religious, empirical, family, interest, naughty, commodity, discerning, penetrating, ambition, shrewdness, squandering, spendthrift, errant, exorbitant, providence, frugality.[50] These are

---

45 Skinner, "The Idea of Negative Liberty" 197.

46 Ibid., 198.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 200, 198.

49 Words that evaluate our "second order desires", what Charles Taylor calls "our language of evaluative distinctions" of "qualitative contrast". See for example, Taylor, "What is Human Agency," *Philosophical Papers* 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 15-44. The capacity for reflective self-evaluation that is manifested in the formation of second-order desires is something both Taylor and Skinner identify as crucial features of human agency.

50 Skinner, "Analysis of Political Thought and Action" 114-115, 119-28.

terms which perform an evaluative as well as a descriptive function in language;[51] they are used to describe individual actions or states of affairs, and to characterize the motives for the sake of which these actions can be performed. If the criteria for applying one of these terms can be plausibly claimed to be present in a given set of circumstances, this not only serves to describe the given action or state of affairs, but also to evaluate it in a certain way. This range of descriptive terms have the special characteristics of having a standard application to perform one of two contrasting ranges of uses: they are standardly used, that is, to commend (and express approval for) or else condemn (and express disapproval for) the actions or states of affairs which they are also employed to describe.

Skinner isolates three main disagreements that arise over the application of our appraisive vocabulary to our social world, and argues that these linguistic disagreements, these disagreements about grammar or use, are also disagreements about our social world itself. One type of argument over the use of appraisive terms centres on the nature and range of the criteria in virtue of which the word or expression is standardly used, the criteria for applying the term.[52] When we find ourselves debating whether or not a word ought to be applied as a description of a particular state of affairs, our linguistic debate is also a substantive social debate, "for it can equally well be characterized as an argument between two rival social theories and their attendant methods of classifying social reality."[53] Even if there is agreement about the criteria for applying an appraisive term, a second type of dispute can arise over its use, namely its correct range of reference[54], whether a given set of circumstances can be claimed to yield the criteria in virtue of which the

---

51 Ibid., 111. See footnote 46.

52 Skinner, "Language and Social Change," Meaning and Context, ed., Tully, 121, 122-23.

53 Ibid., 123.

54 Ibid., 122.

term is normally employed. Like the first dispute such a disagreement is a substantively social one, not just linguistic, "for what is being contended in effect is that a refusal to apply the term in a certain situation may constitute an act of social insensitivity or a failure of social awareness."[55] Even if there is agreement about the criteria for applying an appraisive term, and also agreement that a given set of circumstances can properly be said to answer to those criteria, there is still a third type of dispute that can arise about the use of a term, namely what exact range of attitudes the term can standardly be used to express or signal. To use Austin's jargon, this is the term's "speech-act potential" - the nature and range of the speech-acts it can be used to perform. Once again, this can be characterized as a substantive social dispute and not merely a linguistic one, "for in this case what is at issue is the possibility that a group of language users may be open to the charge of having a mistaken or an undesirable social attitude."[56]

What this analysis reveals is that there is a "strongly holistic" relationship between a word and an entire vocabulary, an evaluative language and the social action it helps justify.[57] Language, ideology, is interwoven in the practice it serves to justify. To see this relationship is, Skinner writes, "... to see the point at which our social reality and our social fabric mutually prop

---

55 Ibid., 125.

56 Ibid., 128.

57 "... a term such as *art* gains its meaning from the place it occupies within an entire conceptual scheme. To change the criteria for applying it will thus be to change a vast deal else besides....So an argument over the application of the term *art* is potentially nothing less than an argument over two rival (though not of course incommensurable) ways of approaching and dividing up a large tract of our cultural experience...."Ibid., 124.

each other up."[58] And this is to say that ideology is not simply 'superstructural' but can change the practice it is meant to describe.[59] Once again, Skinner recognizes a Wittgensteinian source of this position. He rejects the claim that fully intended and complex actions are best understood as the results of causes which are antecedent to and contingently connected with the resulting actions and favours instead the "Wittgensteinian notion" to the effect that there is a logical connection between the agent's intentions and actions.[60] What Skinner's analysis tells us about a word changing its meaning is that "we must focus not on the 'internal structure' of particular words, but rather their role in upholding complete social philosophies." The historian is therefore obliged to examine the variety of social philosophies and not simply the sense and reference of the word, if she is to understand the meaning of a word and how it changes over time.

Skinner's holism has clear implications for human agency (the notion of a self, of a responsible human agent and the human capacity for reflective self-evaluation) and it is for this reason that it is a very useful methodology particularly with regards to explaining a very specific question in political philosophy: conceptual innovation and change. Skinner's histories consider a type of situation in which the agent is engaged in a form of social or political action that is in some way untoward, and also possesses a strong motive for attempting to legitimate it. "In such a situation the agent must be able to

---

58 Ibid., 132. For more on Skinner's holism see pages 248-249. Skinner cites Charles Taylor's "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" to support his argument . Ibid., see endnote number 33, page 313. Taylor speaks of "the artificiality of the distinction between social reality and the language of description of that social reality....To separate the two and distinguish them...is forever to miss the point." Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," reprinted in Taylor, *Philosophical Papers 2*, 34.

59 "A successful manipulation of the criteria for the application of a term that is, a manipulation that becomes conventional - causes a change in 'social beliefs and theories'...'social perceptions and awareness' ...and, finally...'social values and attitudes.'" Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword" 15; Skinner "Language and Social Change" 123-30.

60 Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding" 59.

describe his behaviour in such a way as to override any hostile appraisals of it, and in this way to legitimate what he is doing to those who may have doubts about the morality of his actions."[61] Since the agent justifies his own actions on the basis of certain professed principles, beliefs, or an ideology, the explanation of the agent's behaviour must include the agents's professed principles, beliefs or ideology. There is in other words a connection between the principles for the sake of which he professes to act and his actual social or political actions.[62] In Skinner's words, "...any course of action is inhibited from occurring if it cannot be legitimated; it follows that any principle which helps to legitimate a course of action must also be amongst the enabling conditions of its occurrence."[63]

The central task of this "innovating ideologist" (or revolutionary) is that of legitimating untoward social actions, to legitimate a new range of social actions which, in terms of the existing ways of applying the moral vocabulary prevailing in his society, are currently regarded as in some way untoward or illegitimate and this is achieved by successfully manipulating the terms in which his actions are described and evaluated. "His aim must be therefore be to show that a number of existing and favourable evaluative-descriptive terms can somehow be applied to his apparently untoward actions. If he can somehow perform this trick, he can thereby hope to argue that the condemnatory descriptions which are otherwise liable to be applied to his actions can in consequence be discounted."[64] It is by manipulating the set of evaluative-descriptive terms that any society succeeds in establishing and altering its moral identity: by describing and thereby commending certain courses of action as (say) courageous or honest, while describing and

---

61 Skinner "Analysis of Political Thought and Action" 110.

62 Ibid., 111.

63 Ibid., 117.

64 Ibid., 112.

condemning others as treacherous or disloyal, we sustain our picture of the actions and states of affairs which we wish either to disavow or legitimate.[65]

I want to now provide two examples of Skinner's Wittgenstein historiography, two illustrations that show two different aspects of his approach: how we can understand what an author is 'doing' by examining the ways she or he manipulates the conventional languages of self-understanding, and how history can be used as an 'object of comparison'. In both cases Skinner turns to the Italian Renaissance and particularly the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli.

An 'Object of Comparison': Machiavellian *Libertà*

As I explained earlier, Skinner uses historical examples in order to free us from some conventional or commonplace self-understanding, as a means of questioning rather than underpinning our current beliefs. An example of this use of history is Skinner's "The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives."[66] In this article Skinner explains that his interest is not to use historical examples to help justify, affirm or 'mirror' our current practices and self-understandings but on the contrary his aim is to turn to history to enable us to "stand back from our own beliefs and the concepts we use to express them", forcing us perhaps to reconsider, to recast or even abandon some of our beliefs, to release us from the confines of an accepted political convention "in light of these wider perspectives."[67] The conventional beliefs Skinner has in mind is a prevailing orthodoxy around political liberty - the freedom of action available to individual agents within the confines imposed by their membership of political society. The orthodox

---

65 Ibid.

66 This Skinnerian method as a way of 'seeing things differently' is also evident in Skinner's most recent publication *Liberty Before Liberalism*.

67 Skinner, "The Idea of Negative Liberty" 202.

view of political liberty that Skinner seeks to challenge is that such liberty is essentially negative (the absence of constraint) and negative liberty is to be construed as an 'opportunity concept' as nothing but the absence of constraint and as unconnected with the pursuit of any purposes of substantive ends; it is not connected to the idea of civic virtues or public service and it is necessarily connected to individual rights.[68]

Skinner turns to what he takes to be the lessons of history to show that

> ...in an earlier and now discarded tradition of thought about social freedom, the negative idea of liberty as the mere non-obstruction of individual agents in the pursuit of their chosen ends was combined with the ideas of virtue and public service in just the manner nowadays assumed by all sides to be impossible without incoherence.[69]

Thus Skinner's aim is to "supplement and correct" this prevailing and misleadingly restricted sense of what can and cannot be said and done with the concept of negative liberty by examining the record of "the very different things that have been said and done with it at earlier phases in the history of our own culture."[70] By turning to the Roman republican theory of citizenship[71] as articulated by Machiavelli's *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, Skinner shows how negative liberty is consistent with "the performance of public services, and the cultivation of the virtues needed

---

68 Skinner argues that "there is one fundamental assumption shared by virtually all the contributors to the current debate about social freedom. Even Charles Taylor and Isaiah Berlin are able to agree on it: that it is only if we can give content to the idea of objective human flourishing that we can hope to make sense of any theory purporting to connect the concept of individual liberty with virtuous acts of public service. The thesis I propose to defend is that this shared and central assumption is a mistake" Ibid., 197

69 Ibid., 197.

70 Ibid., 197-98.

71 "...a theory that enjoyed a brilliant though short-lived revival in Renaissance Europe before being challenged and eventually eclipsed by the more individualistic (and contractarian) styles of political reasoning that triumphed in the course of the seventeenth century." Ibid., 203.

to perform them...." that these are shown to be "instrumentally necessary to the avoidance of coercion and servitude", and thus "to be necessary conditions of assuring any degree of personal liberty in the ordinary Hobbesian sense of the term."[72] Even though many contemporary negative theorists say this is contradictory, Machiavelli's is a theory of negative liberty, but he develops it without making any use whatever of the concept of individual rights. As Skinner explains, Machiavelli writes that the prudent citizen recognizes that "whatever extent of negative liberty he may enjoy, it can only be the outcome of...a steady recognition and pursuit of the public good at the expense of all purely individual and private ends."[73]

The various historically-constituted languages of understanding are therefore used, as Wittgenstein writes in section 130 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, "to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities" and this comparison is intended to enable us to change our way of looking at things, to cure our aspect-blindness about political liberty to get us to see things differently about the concept of negative liberty.

What an Author is 'Doing': Machiavelli as an Innovating Ideologist

The second example of Quentin Skinner's Wittgensteinian historiography illustrates how understanding a text entails retrieving what an author is 'doing'. Skinner's most cited illustration is Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. How are we to make sense of Machiavelli's advice in Chapter 16, that "Princes must learn when not to be virtuous"? Skinner writes,

> Suppose that the sense and intended reference of the statement are both perfectly clear. Suppose even that this clarity is the result of a

---

72 Ibid., 217.

73 Ibid., 218.

study of the entire social context of the utterance - a study which might have revealed, say, that virtue in princes had in fact led to their ruin at the time. Now suppose two alternative truths about the statement itself: either that such cynical advice was frequently offered in Renaissance moral tracts; or that scarcely anyone had ever publicly offered such cynical advice as a precept before. It is obvious that any commentator wishing to understand the statement must find out which of these alternatives is nearer the truth. If the answer is the first alternative, the intended force of the utterance itself in the mind of the agent who uttered it can only have been to endorse or emphasize an accepted moral attitude. But if the answer is the second the intended force of the utterance becomes more like that of rejecting or repudiating an established moral commonplace.[74]

According to Skinner something like each of these historical claims has been advanced in turn by historians of ideas about the statement to this effect to be found in Machiavelli's *Prince*. Not only is just one of these claims correct, he argues, but also the decision on which one is correct "will very greatly affect any understanding of what Machiavelli can have been intending to achieve." The question is potentially "whether he intended to subvert or to sustain one of the more fundamental moral commonplaces of political life in his time."[75]

Skinner's claim is that in order to understand this (or any) statement, it cannot be enough to grasp the statement itself or what its context may be alleged to show about what it must have meant, since the context is evidently capable of yielding *both* of the alternative interpretations, "and so can hardly be invoked to reject either in favour of the other." It must follow, Skinner continues, that in order to have understood any given statement made in the past, the further aspect which must still be grasped is its role in upholding or challenging a prevailing social practice, "*how* what was said was meant, and thus what *relations* there may have been between various different

---

74 Skinner "Meaning and Understanding" 61-62.
75 Ibid., 62.

statements even within the same general context."[76] Understanding an utterance is therefore connected to our grasping how it enabled, legitimated and commended a practice under threat or how it challenged, condemned and undermined one. Grasping this practical or strategic purpose or point is a crucial aspect of understanding the text and this cannot be supplied by studying the linguistic social context alone.

Skinner uses this historical method to explain Machiavelli's point in writing *The Prince*, why he was an "innovating ideologist." Machiavelli was attempting to show that a favourable evaluative-descriptive term prevalent in early sixteenth-century Renaissance Italian society, *virtù*, could be applied to activities that would conventionally be described as illegitimate or vicious - parsimonious violence, lying, deceit. Machiavelli's contribution to conceptual innovation was a result of his ability to successfully manipulate the term so that it could be used to describe and so justify these activities. He achieved this end by stretching the criteria of application and the range of reference of *virtù* and furthermore he expanded the term's speech-act potential- the range of attitudes the term could standardly be used to express; Using Skinner's jargon, he used a term normally employed to condemn what it describes in such a way as to make it contextually clear that, in his view, the relevant action or state of affairs ought to in fact be commended.[77]

III. Deeds are Convention-Governed: 'Marching Backwards into Battle'

Convention: What is 'Taken for Granted'

I have been exploring the various aspects of Quentin Skinner's methodology that he shares with Wittgenstein's later philosophy: language is interwoven in human practices (words are deeds); an author's intention or purpose is

---

76 Ibid., 62.
77 Skinner, "Language and Social Change" 129.

holistically related to the action it used to characterize; principles which help to legitimate a course of action are amongst the enabling conditions of its occurrence; misunderstanding a text is a result of aspect-blindness - neglecting the motley of human practices, being held captive by a general or comprehensive theory which purports to lay out the essential features of the phenomena we are trying to understand; a way of freeing ourselves from the craving for the general or essential is a survey of the vocabularies, the grammar, of modern social ʿnd political philosophy by examining the specific cases, the examples, in order to, in Wittgenstein's words, "see something different each time".[78] In the last section I outlined that one of the important implications of this use-based or practical historiography is that it clarifies how rational assessment takes place within 'convention-governed' contexts or conceptual schemes: it allows the historian to notice those aspects of conceptual change that occur because 'innovating ideologists' go against a rule or convention by manipulating their available appraisive or evaluative-descriptive vocabulary to justify their untoward behaviour.

But this Wittgensteinian historiography this 'history of philosophical grammar' has another crucial component, a second line of argument that we must now consider. Skinner writes, "...the agent wishing to legitimate what he is doing at the same time as gaining what he wants cannot be the instrumental problem of tailoring his normative language in order to fit his projects. It must in part be the problem of tailoring his projects in order to fit the available language."[79] The "innovating ideologists" Skinner examines, the political theorists who manipulate their available appraisive or evaluative-descriptive vocabulary, were practicing forms of reflection that in fact rested on and took for granted a whole range of conventions of the form

---

78 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II, xi, 212e.

79 Skinner *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vols. I & II, xii-xiii.

of life in which they thought and acted.[80] The claim here is that there are limits to the agent's ability to single-handedly or privately manipulate concepts to her own ends. Our critical inquiries are not monological or radically reflexive; rather, they always take place within some ways of thinking and acting that are taken for granted and not questioned.[81] The nature and range of evaluative concepts which any agent can hope to apply in order to legitimate his behaviour can in no case be set by the agent himself. On the contrary, the human agent is constrained by other accepted principles of the society in which she is acting; other conventions set limits on how far the innovating ideologist can stretch the use of terms to legitimate his actions.[82] Conceptual innovation must be grounded or justified partly in terms of these conventions, in terms of a vocabulary that is not questioned but taken for granted; it must show that some of an already-existing range of favourable evaluative-descriptive terms can be applied as descriptions.[83] To this extent, "every revolutionary is...obliged to march backwards into battle."[84] To justify his behaviour, the innovative ideologist must show that it can be described in a way "that those who currently disapprove of it can somehow be brought to see that they ought to withhold this disapproval after all." And to achieve this end, "he has no option but to show that at least some

---

80 Tully "Progress and Scepticism" 277.

81 Ibid., 276.

82 The availability of evaluative concepts that the agent can manipulate "is a question about the prevailing morality of the society in which the agent is acting; their applicability is a question about the standard of meaning and use of the terms involved, and about how far these can be plausibly stretched. These factors serve as rather specific constraints and directives to the agent about what precise lines of conduct afford him the best means of bringing his untoward actions in line with some accepted principle, and thereby legitimating what he does while still gaining what he wants." Skinner, "Analysis of Political Thought and Action" 117.

83 Ibid., 112. "...however revolutionary the ideologist concerned may be, he will nevertheless be committed, once he has accepted the need to legitimate his behaviour, to attempting to show that some of the existing range of favourable evaluative-descriptive terms can somehow be applied as apt descriptions of his own apparently untoward actions."

84 Ibid., 112.

of the terms which his ideological opponents use when they are describing the actions and states of affairs of which they approve can be applied to include and thus legitimate his own untoward behaviour."[85] Tully has argued in his summary of Skinner's position, that the term that does all the work here is 'convention' and Skinner uses it heuristically to refer to relevant linguistic commonplaces uniting a number of texts: shared vocabulary, principles, assumptions, criteria for testing knowledge claims, problems, conceptual distinctions."[86] The innovating ideologist is constrained because he "changes one part of an ideology by holding another part fast; by appealing to and so reinforcing convention."[87] This is precisely what Wittgenstein means in *Philosophical Investigations* section 201 by " 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases."

An illustration of the conventional 'taken for granted' features of conceptual innovation is Skinner's example of *The Prince*. Machiavelli justified his advice, that a prince need not always act virtuously, by arguing that this would enable a prince to achieve what everyone assumed a prince should achieve: i.e., act with virtue in laying down good arms and good laws and so achieve honour, praise and glory. "Since Machiavelli is standardly taken to be one of the most radical of theorists, Skinner's analysis shows very graphically the conventional limits to ideological innovation."[88] In the example of Machiavelli, one of the conventions of the 'advice to princes' literature is always to advise the prince to act virtuously. By reading Machiavelli's advice in the light of this convention we can understand that what he is doing in using it is "to challenge and repudiate accepted moral commonplaces."[89]

---

85 Ibid.

86 Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword" 9.

87 Ibid., 14.

88 Ibid.

89 Skinner, " 'Social Meaning' and the Explanation of Social Action" 86.

We Do Not Follow Rules Privately

Skinner's way of doing history, his examination of the manipulation of use-conventions governing a prevailing normative vocabulary, is deeply influenced by the lessons of Wittgenstein. This influence is apparent particularly in the similarities between Skinner's concept of 'convention' and Wittgenstein concept of a form of life. The 'taken for granted' feature of human understanding, 'the given', what Skinner calls convention, is what Wittgenstein famously referred to as 'forms of life'.[90] Forms of life are language-games, the variety of ongoing linguistic practices that presuppose certain abilities or skills. Wittgenstein sought to show again and again that any language-game or form of life involves uses that are taken for granted, even the most reflective language-games. The argument that a prevailing normative vocabulary cannot be manipulated indefinitely or be employed to legitimate any untoward or unusual practice, that such manipulation must be grounded in terms of what is already accepted and taken for granted, by appealing to convention, is what Wittgenstein refers to as the impossibility of following a rule privately. As I outlined in the preceding chapters, rules are often implicitly followed. They are not necessarily explicitly laid-out but inarticulate and embedded in their practices, language-games, forms of life, in what is taken for granted. Even where there are no clearly defined rules, it is not the case that 'anything goes': there are what Taylor calls "constitutive distinctions", customary practices, constitutive rules between different soi is of behaviour such that one sort of behaviour is appropriate for one action or context and the other for another action or context.[91] There are, in other words, conventions such that the practices they govern could not exist without them. We learn how to play a game like chess or tennis through our

---

90Philosophical Investigations, Part II, xi, 226e. "What has to be accepted, the given,is - so one could say - forms of life."

91 Taylor,"Interpretation" 34.

ongoing participation in the form of life, game or the practice in which a rule is customarily used, "purely practically, without learning any explicit rules."[92] Rule-following is a social practice because understanding how to apply a rule correctly requires familiarity with the practice in which it is embedded, by "watching how others play."[93] Skinner's understanding of 'convention' is consistent with Wittgenstein's use of 'rule-following': something of which "the agent may not be aware, and which he deliberately follows."[94]

IV. Understanding Among 'Convention-Governed' Contexts

In the previous sections I outlined how disputes about the application or use of terms (the manipulation of use-conventions governing a prevailing normative vocabulary) are also disputes about our social world itself; furthermore such disputes about use take place with others, as debates about how, in the absence of universally applicable rules, to understand and critically evaluate what Tully has called these "convention-governed contexts."[95] This process can be understood in Wittgensteinian terms as 'obeying a rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases: diversity is irreducible because convention-governed contexts are constantly contested and modified by the human agents, or innovating ideologists, operating within them. In this final section, I want to explore how understanding and critical reflection takes place not just within, but among these continually contested and modified convention-governed contexts. The problem that must be addressed is how understanding and critical evaluation can occur at all in the absence of any culturally-invariant conceptual scheme or essential understanding that could unite the various conflicting, rival or uncombinable historical

---

92 On Certainty 94.

93 Ibid. and *Philosophical Investigations* Part I, section 54.

94 Skinner " 'Social Meaning' and the Explanation of Social Action" 94.

95 Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword" 21.

conventions, practices and forms of life. More laconically, can we rank different languages of historical explanation, different historically situated self-understandings and if so how?

Skinner's recent answer to this problem, like Wittgenstein's, is to invoke a dialogical, comparative approach. In his *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Skinner suggests that the appropriate model in moral and political reasoning "will always be that of a dialogue, the appropriate stance a willingness to negotiate over rival intuitions concerning the applicability of evaluative terms."[96] This dialogical style of moral and political reasoning (a humanist vision now widely repudiated) insists that it will always be possible to construct a plausible argument "*in utramque partem*, on either side of the case"[97] and that "our watchword ought to be *audi alteram partem*, always listen to the other side."[98] This is not an approach that makes sense of different points of view by means of a common-coordinate system on which to plot them, but an approach in which "we strive to reach understanding and resolve disputes in a conversational way."[99]

A Conversation of Wittgensteinians

Following Skinner's advice, we can try to understand Skinner's position on understanding and critical reflection in the form of a dialogue by reviewing Skinner's "A Reply to My Critics" in *Meaning and Context*. Among the replies to the contributors the text, Skinner devotes a considerable attention to a variety of questions posed by Charles Taylor who shares the dialogical ideal. What is significant in this exchange is that the questions and answers

---

96 Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric* 16.

97 Ibid., 9.

98 Ibid., 15.

99 Ibid., 16.

they provide reveal important similarities, 'family resemblances', with the Wittgensteinian problematic. And true to their Wittgensteinian orientation, part of the dispute concerns the application or use of appraisive terms such as 'truth', 'power' and 'rationality'. In Taylor's jargon, this is a dispute about our language of 'evaluative distinction' of 'qualitative contrast'. The Skinner-Taylor debate is a dialogue on seeing aspects, a conversation of Wittgensteinians. In this way Skinner's answer to the problem of understanding and critical reflection is shaped in conversation with, sometimes in struggle against Taylor and other Wittgensteinians. The best explanation of his account must include his interlocutors' views because it is in the context of these conversations and contrasting views about what a dialogical epistemology should be and how conflicting schemes are assessed that the reader achieves perspicuity about rational assessment. In comparing Skinner and Taylor we can discern amidst the important differences, equally important similarities in the answer to critical assessment or rationality in the context of irreducible plurality.

Taylor asks several questions of Skinner's approach including what the truth value is of the theories the texts expound, whether the context of struggle can be kept from the context of truth, and whether truth can be bracketed. These remarks are consistent with a Wittgensteinian understanding in that Taylor's concern is that Skinner's approach privileges a single or all-embracing principle of politics from which everything can be deduced, a principle that does not allow for other goods vying for our allegiance. To use Wittgenstein's phrase in *Philosophical Investigations* section 115, a picture holds Skinner captive and he cannot get outside it. This picture is that relations of domination, and the strategies which create and sustain them, have totally invaded the world of everyday self-understanding, making all dominant ideas the outcome of conflicts which centre on war and the struggle for

power.[100] This "neo-Clausewitzian" thesis seems to bracket the question of truth because "the arbiter of ideas is a kind of power which is no repecter of truth."[101]

Taylor's charge against Skinner is that he is unable to see things differently, that he is blind to the plurality of aspects, to the different conflicting or mutually restricting languages of explanation and their inherent conceptions of the good. Skinner's appeal to 'power', Taylor's argument suggests, is a type of bewitchment by the dangers Wittgenstein speaks about in section 97 of the *Philosophical Investigations* - he is "under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential," in his investigation "resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language", a "*super*-order" or a "*super*-concept" that explains the variety of contemporary forms of life. In Taylor's words, Skinner's "exciting new insight" is an example of "an old temptation", which is "...a tendency to focus on and make primary just those aspects of social life which seem closest to invariant across different cultural contexts...."[102] To paraphrase Wittgenstein, Skinner's insight suffers the illusion of mistaking the neighbourhood struggle for the politics of entire city.

Taylor poses two questions of Skinner, which I will address in this section of the chapter: "Is this neo-Clausewitzian thesis Skinner's?" and Taylor asks whether this neo-Clausewitzian thesis is at all plausible.[103] Both are critical questions about Skinner's work, ones that need to be asked since they raise the spectre of a type of 'essentialism' and so an inconsistency in Skinner's way of looking at things. The 'plausibility' question is easier to answer, and

---

100 Taylor "The Hermeneutics of Conflict" 224-226.
101 Ibid., 224.
102 He continues, "... war; the reproduction of material means of life; the conditions of ecological survival; the presence or absence of civil strife." Ibid., 228.
103 Ibid., 223, 224.

Taylor's reply amounts to an effective and successful objection from a non-vulgar Wittgensteinian point of view. Since 'power' is not an all-embracing, culturally invariant or timeless principle, on Taylor's view, the fate and prevalence of ideas cannot be explained uniquely as the outcome of conflicts which centre on war and the struggle for power. Other aspects are relevant to explain the persistence and diffusion of ideas. What is conventionally true and valid must also play a deciding role. Moreover, even if we agree that 'struggle' does play a prima y role in the explanation of the fate and prevalence of ideas and that this is only randomly related to their truth and validity, "it is a different, proposition altogether to hold that those self-interpretations which emerge out of the daily struggle for self-understanding are quite unrelated to their validity to us."[104] Taylor points to 'the affirmation of ordinary life' and how it gained its place partly as a result of struggle, and one phase of this was a spiritual battle for "the hearts and minds" of the sixteenth century. "But war and the preparations for war doesn't exclusively explain the terms and nature of the struggle."[105]

Skinner describes Taylor's position as a claim in which "the question of truth must always be raised"[106] but mistakenly characterizes Taylor's position on truth in general and unitary terms. Taylor is actually invoking not a general but a conventional understanding of truth and is rejecting the Rortian view that the 'truth of the matter' is never at least implicitly raised; truth is an *aspect* of normal conversation - something that impinges, that just is part of a dialogue that aims at understanding. The text then must be seen as part of a conversation in which reasons are exchanged under the aspect of 'truth-

---

104 Ibid., 226. Taylor continues: "To put it most simply, we may have to explain their rise at least partly in terms of their fit with what we have become, rather than explaining in reverse direction, where what we become is a function of the language which has been imposed on us by strategies of power. " Ibid.
105 Ibid., 227-28.
106 Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics" 237.

seeking'. In the act of understanding (such as historical retrieval) this truth-seeking aspect cannot be excluded because one's language of explanation and self-understanding confronts the languages of self-understanding of one's interlocutors. It is in this sense that a language of political explanation, a political theory, is unavoidably a potential rival and is inseparable from an affirmation or negation with the historical theories it is being called on to explain.[107] On Taylor's view, by avoiding the question of truth-seeking, Skinner's approach is avoiding the issue of whether it negates or affirms the self-understandings it seeks to explain. And so Taylor takes Skinner's avoidance to mean that he is intending to promote a truth-free historical explanation - history uniquely explained by relations of domination.

Taylor's objection to this apparent truth-freedom is to argue that if relations of domination (war, conquest, expulsion, imposed industrialization) were the defining, primary or founding events of modern society then they could uniquely explain the fate and prevalence of ideas; 'truth' would have no place as an arbiter of ideas.[108] But they are not primary or essential. While 'power' is an important langauge-game, it does not displace nor does it subsume all other languages of explanation. The reality of historical change is "a much more complicated and messy business" in which "the truth of ideas is neither decisive nor totally irrelevant to their fate, since this truth would have a very different weight in different facets of what was nevertheless a single interconnected culture."[109] Rather than setting up 'truth' as the foundational standard of valuation, Taylor's proposal is not unlike Wittgenstein's in section 107 of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes

---

107 Taylor, "The Hermeneutics of Conflict" 224.
108 Ibid., 226.
109 Ibid.

the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty.—We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!

Taylor's proposal is to return to the 'rough ground' of history: a "messy picture"[110] of the reality of things where the explanation of ideological change is the result of struggle, but also among other things, such cherished standards of valuation as truth, justice and right.[111]

Thus Taylor dispenses with the plausibility of the neo-Clausewitzian claim, that the context of struggle can be separated from the context of truth. But what of his other question: is this thesis Skinner's? I will now provide reasons why I think that it is not. My main point throughout this chapter is that the key to understanding Skinner are the lessons of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Like his Wittgensteinian interlocutor, Skinner's response to Taylor can best be understood in the context of a Wittgensteinian framework in which we survey his 'philosophical grammar' - what he is doing and saying, the language-games he is practicing, his intention 'in writing', his point. This framework provides insights into Skinner's position since Skinner's reply to Taylor is a dispute about the correct application of the terms 'truth' and 'reason'. Therefore, it is worth examining whether we can understand what Skinner means by these terms in the context of this Wittgensteinian approach that Skinner employs.

First let's consider the Skinner-Taylor dispute in relation to the three kinds of

---

110 Ibid.
111 Ibid., 223.

disputes mentioned by Skinner that can arise over the application of our appraisive vocabulary to our social world: disagreements about the criteria for applying terms, whether a given set of circumstances can be claimed to yield the criteria in virtue of which the terms are used and about their speech-act potential. It seems that this is not a dispute about the speech-act potential of the terms 'reason', and 'truth'. Both Skinner and Taylor aim to expand the speech-act potential of these terms. Their historical retrievals reveal that they are each innovating ideologists attempting to retrieve, articulate and give prominence to long-forgotten or discredited aspects - application and uses - of a number of concepts including 'reason', 'truth', 'meaning' and 'understanding' such that a variety of different historically-situated actions or states of affairs ought in fact to be called 'rational', 'true, 'meaningful' and 'intelligible' rather than 'irrational', 'false' and 'meaningless'. Rather, the Skinner-Taylor dispute is partly about the criteria of what is 'rational' and 'true', about what set of circumstances can be claimed to yield the criteria in virtue of which the terms are used and therefore the dispute is partly an argument about two competing social theories: on Taylor's view a social and political philosophy that identifies the importance of truth-seeking, and on Skinner's a social and political philosophy that identifies the importance of the strategic use of words.

I want to redescribe this dispute about two competing social and political theories as a confrontation of two aspects, language-games, two ways of framing the multifarious practices of modern social and political thought and action. In other words, while recognizing the differences of their approaches I want to explore the similarities between Skinner and Taylor, particularly in their 'philosophical grammar'. There is much worth noting. Both Taylor and Skinner agree that there are no historically or culturally-invariant standards of rationality and meaning, but accuse each other of appealing to such

standards - 'truth-seeking' in the case of Taylor, 'power' and relations of struggle in the case of Skinner. But as I will now explain, while these differences do point to different aspects of phenomena in question, there are also overlapping similarities in the ways in which Taylor and Skinner use 'reason' and 'truth'. These similarities are in fact revealed in the debate about their differences, particularly in Skinner's reply to Taylor in the section of *Meaning and Context* entitled "A Reply to My Critics". Skinner provides two replies to Taylor's remarks that shows similarities.

Taylor asks whether an historian should try to avoid "taking a stand on the truth of the ideas he or she is examining" and whether it is desirable or even possible to "insulate questions of historical explanation from those of truth".[112] Skinner considers two possible interpretations for these questions. The first reply is as follows: if Taylor is asking whether the historian should "somehow seek to discount or set aside the fact that he or she holds certain beliefs to be true and other false", then Skinner's reply is agreement with Taylor: no historian "can ever hope to perform such an act of forgetting" and in any case "it would be most unwise to try."[113]

The second way that Skinner replies is to respond to Taylor's remarks on truth as a question about the truth value of the beliefs that historians expound. Skinner's reply to Taylor depends on what is meant by the 'truth-value' of beliefs. If by 'truth' Taylor means a wide, metaphorical or extended use of the term Skinner concedes a limited agreement with Taylor. For example, Taylor suggests that a conception of the truth is necessarily embedded in any language of explanation and evaluation, that this language confronts the beliefs we investigate which are themselves true or valid "in

---

112 Ibid., 224, 223; Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics" 236.
113 Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics" 236.

relation to the needs of the people who live under them."[114] Therefore to deny the aspect of truth-seeking leads to ethnocentrism. Skinner replies that he agrees with this use of 'truth', that "our explanations are bound to vary with whatever judgements we make about truth in this extended sense." He adds,

> If we encounter an ideology which we find to be true to the needs of the society living under it, we are sure to treat that very fact as part of the explanation for its success. If we come upon an ideology which is demonstrably untrue in this extended sense, we shall certainly be obliged to explain its success in a very different way.[115]

However, if Taylor means 'truth' in a more restricted sense, Skinner disagrees with Taylor's claim that the context of truth can never be bracketed from the context of struggle. Skinner reviews two senses of the 'restricted' sense of truth, and consequently two reasons for believing that truth can never be bracketed: a comprehensive or general theory of truth, as articulated by Donald Davidson, where the historian is obliged to judge the past on the basis of an historically-invariant principle of truth;[116] and a comprehensive or general theory of 'rationality', where the historian is obliged to judge the past on the basis of a historically-invariant standard of rationality, an algorithm, a

---

114 Taylor, "The Hermeneutics of Conflict" 223 and 226.

115 Skinner "A Reply to My Critics" 237.

116 According to Skinner, the suggestion from Davidson's theory of radical interpretation is that "unless we begin by assuming that the holding of true beliefs constitutes the norm among people we are studying, we shall find ourselves unable to identify what they believe. If too many of their beliefs prove to be false, our capacity to give an account of the subject matter of those beliefs will begin to be undermined. And once this begins to happen, we shall find ourselves unable even to describe what we hope to explain. The implication, as Davidson himself puts it, is that 'if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters'." Ibid., 238.

"single criterion, and hence a method, for discriminating rational beliefs".[117] Skinner rejects both reasons for determining the 'truth' and 'rationality' of past events.

> I think it is fatal to introduce the question of truth into social explanation in this way. To do so is to assume that, whenever an historian encounters a belief which be or she judges to be false, the explanatory problem must always be that of accounting for a lapse of rationality. But this is to equate the holding of rational beliefs with the holding of beliefs that the historian judges to be true. And this is to exclude the obvious possibility that, even in the case of beliefs that nowadays strike us as manifestly false, there may have been good grounds for holding them true in earlier periods.[118]

So Skinner's position is that truth should be bracketed if by 'truth' one means that the historian is obliged to evaluate other languages of self-understanding on the basis of general theories of rationality and truth. If this is what is meant by true and rational, he concludes that it is "fatal to satisfactory social explanation to exclude the possibility of holding a false belief in a wholly rational way."[119] Skinner's use of 'rational' here is connected to a conventional standard of truth as a criteria. When agents hold rational beliefs,"their beliefs should be suitable beliefs for them to hold true in the circumstances in which they find themselves."[120] Rational belief is a belief that an agent has attained "by some accredited process of reasoning"[121], "in

---

117 Ibid., 240. Skinner writes: "False beliefs, it is said, point to failures of reasoning, and failures of reasoning require additional explanations of a kind not needed in the case of true beliefs. This appears, for example, to be the thought underlying Graham's contention that we shall be acting 'in a spirit of ill-judged humility' as historians if we fail to consider the points at which the social beliefs we investigate are 'flawed or inadequate'." Skinner continues, explaining how this historically-invariant view of rationality obliges the historian to consider "the kinds of 'social function or psychological pressure' that could have prevented the agent in question from recognizing 'the mistaken nature of the belief.'"Ibid., 238-239.

118 Ibid., 239.
119 Ibid., 240.
120 Ibid., 239.
121 Ibid., 239.

the light of a certain attitude towards the process of belief-formation itself "[122], a "recognizable chain of reasoning"[123], an "inner coherence"[124], according to "prevailing norms of epistemic rationality" that may be said to give the agent "good grounds for supposing (as opposed to merely desiring or hoping) that the belief in question is true. "[125] As an example of what he means, Skinner turns to the influential explanation of witchcraft beliefs offered Le Roy Ladurie in his classic study *The Peasants of Languedoc*. Skinner rejects Ladurie's position that such beliefs are manifestly false, a mere product of "mass delirium", that they could not be rationally held. These mistaken assumptions commit the historian to the misleading task of looking for an explanation of a breakdown in normal reasoning.[126]

Skinner's rejection of the application of general theories of 'truth' and 'reason' to historical phenomena are persuasively presented, but he is mistaken if he is attributing these uses of 'truth' and 'reason' to Taylor. Like Skinner, Taylor rejects Davidson's view of interpretation and agrees with something like Skinner's contention that what is true is what is conventional. Furthermore, as I argued in the previous chapter, it is not part of Taylor's position that there is a method or algorithm for discriminating rational beliefs or that "[false] beliefs...point to failures of reasoning, and failures of reasoning require additional explanations of a kind not needed in the case of true beliefs."[127]

The point I am making here is that Taylor and Skinner employ the concepts

---

122 Ibid.

123 Ibid., 243.

124 Ibid., 244.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid., 242.

127 Ibid., 238.

of 'truth' and 'reason' in similar ways and they both see historical retrieval in dialogical terms as a conversation between the past and present. Neither Skinner nor Taylor appeal to an essential standard of truth, both reject considering absolute or idealized truth as a criteria in investigations of the rationality of human beliefs.[128] And their rejection of ideal truth is grounded in similar reasons - historically and culturally invariant truth as a criteria of what is rational leads to misunderstanding and ethnocentrism because one is potentially blinded by one's own standards of rational acceptability.[129]

Some of Skinner's critics have suggested that because of his rejection of an absolute criteria of truth, he is a conceptual relativist. I want to explore reasons why this charge is mistaken. As I explained above, since there are no timeless standards of rationality, Skinner's position is that the historically-sensitive explanation (one that avoids anachronism) must distinguish what reasons the historical subjects had for 'holding true' a given belief from what our language of self-understanding holds is rationally acceptable. However, Skinner adds that we can nevertheless acknowledge in this historical comparison that some of the beliefs we are trying to understand are in fact

---

128 Skinner writes: "I am merely insisting that our task as historians is to try to recover Machiavelli's point of view; and that, in order to discharge this task, what we need to employ is solely the concept of rational acceptability, not that of truth", Ibid., 257. This is a convention-based understanding of truth that Taylor would not disagree with , especially Skinner's claim that "even in the case of beliefs that nowadays strike us as manifestly false, there may have been good grounds for holding them true in earlier historical periods." Ibid., 239. There is also agreement in the project against a naturalist account of history. As Skinner writes "I am convinced...that the importance of truth for the kind of historical inquiries I am considering has been exaggerated. I take this to be a product of the fact that too much of the meta-historical discussion has hinged around the analysis of scientific beliefs. In such cases the question of truth may be of some interest. But in most of the cases investigated by historians of ideas, the suggestion that we need to consider the truth of the beliefs under examination is...likely to strike an historian as strange...." Ibid., 256.

129 "Otherwise we are sure to commit the characteristic sin of the 'whig' intellectual historian: that of imputing incoherence or irrationality where we have merely failed to identify some local cannon of rational acceptability." Ibid., 244.

false.[130] In other words, the absence of an external standard of 'reason' does not entail that there can be no rational assessment at all of different beliefs. On the contrary, "there may be many cases in which, if we are to identify what needs to be explained, it may be crucial to insist, of a given belief, that it was less than rational for a given agent to have upheld it."[131]

As an illustration, Skinner turns to a examples from Machiavelli's political works. One of the beliefs fundamental to Renaissance political philosophy was that *virtù* is indispensable to military and political success. Machiavelli maintained that it was due to their loss of this quality that the Florentines of his own age were incapable defending themselves and therefore their liberty. His fellow-countrymen were lacking in *virtù*. But Machiavelli's sources do not support his conclusions, and so Skinner argues that this was not a rational belief. Not on the basis of an external standard, but because Machiavelli's own contemporaries insisted that he was obliged to falsify the relevant authorities in order to maintain this position. In consequence, he "fell rather grievously short of the standards recognized by his own peers for the assessment of evidence and the justification of beliefs."[132] Not only can an historian make such judgements about the rationality of an agent's beliefs, but the historian must - "it matters to be able to make such judgements" because only by enquiring into the rationality of beliefs "can we hope to recognize the range of explanatory puzzles they actually pose."[133]

---

130 "I have asserted that it may well have been rational for Bodin to hold it true that there are witches in league with the devil, even if such beliefs no longer strike us as rationally acceptable. But at no point have I endorsed the thesis of conceptual relativism. I have never asserted that it was true that at one time there were witches in league with the devil, even though such a belief would nowadays strike us as false. To put the point generally, I have merely observed that the question of what it may be rational to hold true can vary with the totality of one's beliefs. I have never put forward the reckless and completely different thesis that truth itself can vary in the same way."Ibid., 255-56.

131 Ibid., 244.

132 Ibid., 245.

133 Ibid., 245. For another example, see Ibid., 258-59.

Skinner expresses this approach in the form of four "precepts" or "maxims" which amount to charity principles or heuristic devices for historians concerned with the explanation and evaluation of different beliefs: make the agents appear as rational as possible, take whatever is said at face value, surround the particular statement of belief with an intellectual context that serves to lend adequate support to it.[134] Furthermore, "if as historians we come upon contradictory beliefs, we should start by assuming that we must in some way have misunderstood or mistranslated some of the propositions by which they are expressed." [135] This is not to say that in order to understand the meaning of alien terms the historian's task is to find a set of "core beliefs" or a "rational bedrock" that can be understood through "the medium of a common language"[136] or that we need to find synonyms in our own language. In this sense 'translatability' is not a criteria of rationality.[137] While there are cases of dramatic incomparability, Skinner reminds us that there is a less dramatic version of the thesis of incommensurability, which insists that at best we can discern the meaning of alien terms "if there is some considerable overlap between our beliefs and the beliefs of those whom we are trying to investigate."[138] This is partly what Wittgenstein meant by perspicuous representation - not looking for something that is common to all but seeing "multifarious relationships" and finding "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."[139]

---

134 Ibid., 246-47.

135 Ibid., 258.

136 Ibid., 248-249, 250.

137 Ibid., 250-53. Skinner writes"...it will always be a mistake for an historian to assume that the task of explicating an alien concept can be reduced that of finding a counterpart in his or her own language for the term that expresses it...." Ibid., 252.

138 Ibid., 252-53.

139 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, section 66.

I mentioned earlier that some of Skinner's critics have suggested that because of his rejection of an absolute criteria of truth, he is a conceptual relativist. The replies I have offered, what I have been exploring points to another notable similarity between Taylor and Skinner: both their philosophical positions are shaped in opposition to a relativist reading of Wittgenstein, and partly shaped by a comparative-dialogical reading. This is where the absence of external standards or an "excessively objectivist conception of rationality" does not entail that rational assessment cannot occur at all.

> Disciples of the later Wittgenstein such as Peter Winch...have all converged on this point....[To] claim that we can assess and criticize the rationality of beliefs is to presuppose 'external standards' of rationality of an 'objective' kind. But we have no access to any such 'super-cultural norm', and in consequence no prospect of being able to 'discriminate existing belief-systems or their components into rational and irrational groups'. The very idea of assessing the rationality of beliefs is thus dismissed as nothing better than an intrusion, a forcible imposition of our own epistemic standards on an alien... 'form of life'.[140]

Elsewhere Skinner contrasts his position with Rorty's "Wittgensteinian style"[141] and position "sometimes ascribed to Wittgenstein" in which we are precluded from asking about the truth of beliefs different from our own on the ground that "they can only be understood as part of a form of life that may be no less cognitively justifiable than our own."[142]

Skinner rejects this relativized Wittgenstein of Rorty and Winch, the thesis of conceptual relativism, as misconceived, unhelpful and self-refuting since it

140 Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics" 243. See also Skinner's reply to the relativist Wittgensteinians' claims of incommensurability in " 'Social Meaning' and The Explanation of Social Action" 80-81, 93.

141 Ibid., 248.

142 Ibid., 257.

embodies the statement of a preferred point of view "while denying that any such point of view can be attained."[143] But this rejection is not motivated by an attempt to "vindicate a substantial and objective conception of reason and employ it in the assessment of beliefs."[144] Skinner's position is that the abandonment of the search for an external, objective, common or neutral standard does not preclude the idea of assessing beliefs for their rationality.[145] His alternative is an approach that judges the agent's beliefs according to her own prevailing conventions and norms.[146] The historian would rationally assess a belief other than her own by "reporting" whether the belief was appropriate "for that particular agent to have espoused in that particular society at that particular time."[147]

So Skinner's historiography is stated in opposition to an 'objectivist' approach but also to a relativized Wittgensteinianism, what Taylor calls a 'vulgar Wittgensteinian' position. Furthermore, Skinner's dispute with Taylor is based on a non-vulgar reading of Wittgenstein. His argument against Ladurie's study for conventional reason resembles a line of argument from the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*. Wittgenstein rejected James George Frazer's attempt to judge the practices of "primitive" societies from the point of view of the scientific practices of contemporary European societies. Frazer's

---

143 Ibid., 257.

144 Ibid., 243. "It seems positively erroneous to try to arrive at a single criterion, and hence a method, for discriminating rational beliefs. The relations between the ideal of rationality and the practices that may be said to manifest it seem far too complex and open ended to be capture in the form of an algorithm.." Ibid, 240.

145 Ibid.

146 "The historian need only be claiming that he or she has uncovered the prevailing norms ⌐ ⌐ the acquisition and justification of beliefs in that particular society, and that the belief in question appears to have been upheld in the face of, rather than in the light of, those norms themselves. The historian need only be claiming, that is, that the agent in question fell short of - or perhaps abandoned, manipulated or in some other way deliberately defied - some generally accepted standard of epistemic rationality." Ibid., 243-244.

147 Ibid., 244.

account made these practices "appear as mistakes" as "stupid actions."[148] Rather than assuming that unfamiliar practices are done "out of sheer stupidity", as error, our explanations of different ways of life or practices should be based on the assumption that there are reasons-in-practice:

> The same savage who, apparently in order to kill his enemy, sticks his knife through a picture of him, really does build his hut of wood and cuts his arrow with skill and not in effigy.[149]

In Skinner's words, "to treat all interpretations as failures unless they yield complete intelligibility is to adopt an unduly optimistic view of what we can hope to bring back with us from the foreign lands of the past."[150]

The evidence I have been exploring suggests that Skinner's position is not neo-Clausewitzian but Wittgensteinian. I redescribed the Skinner-Taylor dispute as a conversation of Wittgensteinians whose concepts point to different aspects of the variety of social and political practices they are examining. According to this re-articulation, the Wittgensteinian Skinner challenges what he mistakenly believes to be Taylor's privileging of truth-seeking. The Wittgensteinian Taylor contests what he mistakenly believes to be Skinner's privileging of conflict and war. Both challenge the other for what they misconstrue as attempts to set up aspects as essences as comprehensive foundations. But both are mistaken about the other's intentions. Skinner's point is to show how the 'strategic' uses of words are as important as the 'truth-seeking' uses. While Taylor's point is to explain why truth-seeking cannot be bracketed from the practice of dialogue (except in specific situations), that the context of struggle cannot be separated from the context of conventionally-held truths. Moreover, neither philosopher adequately

---

148 *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* 1e.
149 Ibid., 4e.
150 Skinner "A Reply to My Critics" 259.

identifies the significant criss-crossing similarities, overlapping similarities and family resemblances with the other, particularly their dialogical Wittgensteinian approach. Both reject the relativism-objectivism problematic in favour of a social and political philosophy of seeing aspects. Both ground their understanding of the practices of modernity in opposition to a 'vulgar Wittgenstein' of conceptual relativism and on a reading of the *Philosophical Investigations* which is comparative-dialogical.

V.   Conclusion

I have argued that Wittgenstein's method of perspicuous representation is not simply a linguistic analysis but is meant to bring hitherto unnoticed aspects of social phenomena to our awareness, to get us (as he writes inthe *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, section 144) "to regard a given case differently" and change "our way of looking at things", to free us from deeply held ways of thinking and looking at the matter at hand, to free us from aspect-blindness, to free us from the captivity of one way of looking at things, to encourage us to see different aspects of the phenomenon in question. This is achieved by means of the 'survey' a technique that shows through comparison and contrast how we are both grounded in conventional self-understandings, but also how a conventional self-understanding is simply one way among many of seeing things, a neighbourhood in the city of language.

Skinner shares overall and detailed similarities with Wittgenstein's method. He aims to free modern political thought from closed and conventional ways of thinking by means of a historical survey of the various language-games of modernity. In this way Skinner's histories clarify the different employments of concepts, the functions that they perform, their various meanings. Skinner's historiography therefore shows how a concept can have different

historically constituted meanings, and how different concepts can have similar meanings. This renders clear the works under scholarly scrutiny by shedding light on what the authors were saying and doing in writing these texts. Understanding what the authors are doing is to understand the author's intent, revolutionary or conventional.

CHAPTER V

Seeing the Natural Sciences Differently:
Thomas S. Kuhn's Neglected Wittgensteinian Aspects

I.   Introduction: Why Kuhn?

In the previous chapters I examined the way Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language can shed light on other forms of human interaction besides speech; how this reading can clarify a debate in social and political theory about human understanding in the face of irreducible plurality. I surveyed the Wittgensteinian influence in Charles Taylor's 'philosophical anthropology' and Quentin Skinner's history of the vocabulary of modern political thought. Wittgenstein's recognition and affirmation of the multiplicity of meanings resonates in these debates in social and political philosophy about human understanding in the face of the complex web of irreducibly plural values, cultures and forms of human reflection.

This recognition of diversity of cultures, practices and forms of reflection is what Wittgenstein's outlook has in common with Thomas Kuhn's, the next example of this survey. Like the previous examples in this survey, the influence of Wittgenstein's remarks on Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (hereafter *Structure*) is clearly evident in the text itself. The connection between Kuhn and Wittgenstein is neither indirect nor hidden, but something Kuhn intended in order to help challenge a longstanding set of beliefs about what scientists do. Kuhn acknowledges that the techniques Wittgenstein uses in the *Philosophical Investigations* play an important role in his philosophical framework. It is a remarkable fact that today, almost forty years after its first printing, these Wittgensteinian aspects have passed almost without remark- perhaps without recognition - in many of the commentaries. It is my aim to make visible these unnoticed or neglected

aspects of Kuhn's own philosophical method - to expose a way of looking at *Structure* as a sensitive and authentic use of the lessons of the *Philosophical Investigations*, as a tool to assist in an explanation of the strange multiplicity of historically situated conventional scientific practices, called paradigms.

II.   Kuhn's Language of Explanation: A Hermeneutical Recovery?

One of the questions that arises among the various commentaries on Kuhn's *Structure* concerns its language of explanation. Among the various attempts to address this question, some have argued that the essay can be best understood as an example of, or with the assistance of, hermeneutics. Two notable examples of this tendency are Richard Bernstein and Alasdair MacIntyre who turn to theories of interpretation in their efforts to explain Kuhn's work. In so doing they have in fact undermined rather than provided a clearer understanding of Kuhn's language of explanation. Understanding what Kuhn is doing will entail getting over the influential picture that has been defended by Bernstein and MacIntyre.

In part 1 of *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science Hermeneutics and Praxis,* in a section entitled "The Recovery of the Hermeneutical Dimension of Science" Bernstein argues that in contemporary reexaminations of the social disciplines "there has been a recovery of the hermeneutical dimension, with its thematic emphasis on understanding and interpretation." Furthermore "this is also what has been happening in postempiricist philosophy and history of science."[1] What Bernstein means by a 'recovery of the hermeneutical dimension' and "its thematic emphasis on understanding and interpretation" is not simply a type of sensitive historical reading, the task of writing the history of science. Rather, Bernstein uses the term

---

1 Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism:Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) 30.

'hermeneutical' in a richer sense.[2] Even though Kuhn himself states that he was not "directly" influenced by hermeneutics, that the term 'hermeneutic' "was no part of [his] vocabulary" when *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was written,[3] Bernstein insists that Kuhn was nevertheless following a hermeneutical rule.[4]

Despite the absence of direct evidence, Bernstein argues that there is in Kuhn's attempts to explain his non-positivist epistemology a "coincidence and convergence"[5] between his approach and the hermeneutical tradition. Bernstein's thesis is that Kuhn's essay has a "groping quality", a fundamental blindness to and inarticulacy about the philosophical sources that ground the essay's concepts of reason and understanding. "It is as if..." Bernstein declares "...he has been searching for a proper model to express his awareness...."[6] Bernstein proposes that hermeneutics is Kuhn's model: not only is he unavoidably involved in interpretation, but his conception of rationality is essentially Gadamerian:

> I will argue that without being completely aware of what he is doing Kuhn is appealing to a conception of rationality that has been at the core of tradition of practical philosophy that Gadamer seeks to disclose and revive.[7]

---

2 "There is a much stronger and much more consequential sense in which the hermeneutical dimension of science has been recovered. In the critique of...logical positivism and empiricism; the questioning of the claims of the primacy of the hypothetical-deductive model of explanation; in the questioning of the sharp dichotomy that has been made between observational and theoretical language; in the insistence on the indetermination of theory by fact, and in the exploration of the ways in which all description and observation are theory-impregnated, we find claims and arguments that have been at the very heart of hermeneutics...." Ibid., 31.

3 Thomas Kuhn, "Preface," *The Essential Tension* xv. Cited in Ibid.

4 "It is primarily because the internal dialectic of contemporary philosophy of science, by reflection and argumentation about a correct understanding of scientific inquiry, that they have stressed those features of science (and not just the study of science and its history) that are hermeneutical. " Ibid., 33-34.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 40.

7 Ibid., 41.

Kuhn's Similarities with Gadamer

It is easy to see why Bernstein characterises Kuhn's approach as an example of Gadamerian hermeneutics, and therefore why he announces the retrieval of a 'hermeneutical dimension' in the philosophy of science. The numerous and important similarities between Gadamerian hermeneutics and postempiricist philosophy of science make such a comparison seem obvious. For example, both Gadamer and Kuhn fundamentally try to answer the question "how is human understanding possible?" and the dynamic process by which knowledge is gained and accepted beyond their presumed 'logical' or methodological self-image.[8] Gadamer's answer calls into question the enlightenment principle of rationality of accepting nothing as certain which can in any way be doubted. Contrary to this rule of Cartesian certainty, he attempts to recover what has been suppressed and forgotten in the intentional conditions of experience.[9] His position is that rationality is grounded in and cannot be radically freed from the totality of our social 'prejudgments', the expectations that we bring with us.[10] Knowing cannot be

8 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Foreword to the Second Edition," *Truth and Method* xviii. Kuhn, *Structure* 9 and Kuhn,"Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research?"*Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* ed. Lakatos and Musgrave 1.

9 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 240. The hermeneutics developed by Gadamer is an attempt to understand what the human sciences are beyond their methodological self-consciousness "and what connects them to the totality of our experiences of the world." Ibid., xv. The investigation is concerned to seek "that experience of truth that transcends the sphere of control of scientific method wherever it is to be found...modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science." Ibid., xii. Just as in experiences of art, Gadamer's hermeneutics explores the idea of "truths that go essentially beyond the range of methodological knowledge...." Ibid., xiii. Gadamer sometimes describes understanding as an 'event' as well as an 'experience' Ibid., 442, 445-447.

10 Gadamer actually uses the term 'prejudice': "This recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust." However, Gadamer is careful to explain that "it is not until the en¹· ¹itenment that the concept of prejudice acquires the negative aspect that we are familiar with...." The enlightenment critique of religion limits the meaning of the word to 'unfounded judgement', and thereby attains its negative connotation: "...there is one prejudice of the enlightenment that is essential to it: the fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which deprives tradition of its power." Ibid., 239-240. See also Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy, ed. *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977) 285-291.

founded in what cannot be doubted because there is no such thing as complete doubt: the practice of doubting presupposes and leaves unquestioned the complex variety of these socially and historically constituted prejudgments. Moreover, our prejudgments enable us to understand and know they "...constitute the horizon of a particular present, for they represent that beyond which it is impossible to see."[11]

This is not to say that we are simply trapped in the boundaries of our own prejudices, that our prejudgments are "a fixed set of opinions and evaluations that determine and limit the horizon of the present" nor that the past can be distinguished from the present as "a fixed ground" as "otherness".[12] Part of the task of hermeneutics is to distinguish "legitimate prejudices" from all the countless ones that our critical reason must overcome.[13] The horizon of the present is being continually formed and contested by the encounter of different horizons of the present and past.The celebrated description of this 'encounter' is the 'fusion of horizons', which is a description of understanding itself: "Understanding" Gadamer writes "...is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves."[14]

It is on the basis of this anti-representational conception of rationality that Bernstein claims that:

> ... the type of rationality that Kuhn has been struggling to articulate when dealing with complex issues of theory choice and paradigm switches—his insistence that reasons function as values which can be differently weighted and applied to concrete situations, and his defence of the role of judgement in making choices and decisions—are closely related to Gadamer's analysis of phronêsis and the role that it plays in

1 1 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 272.
1 2 Ibid., 272-73.
1 3 Ibid., 246.
1 4 Ibid., 273.

understanding and interpretation.[15]

MacIntyre's 'Dramatic Narrative'

Unlike Bernstein, Alasdair MacIntyre sees in Kuhn's account of competing scientific practices resemblances not to Gadamer's conception of reason but to Descartes' and that is superimposed on an ultra-conservative view of science.[16] Kuhn's description of scientific revolution as a case of scientists "seeing differently" is a bleak picture of radical interpretive doubt and the utter failure of mutual understanding, in which adherents of rival paradigms do no just disagree but "every relevant area of rationality is invaded by that disagreement."[17]

An agent facing such a situation of rational justification of rival uncombinable interpretive schemata is in the midst of an epistemological crisis,[18] and one that is "essentially the same as the Cartesian account of epistemological crises in philosophy" because "[everything] is put in question simultaneously. There is no rational continuity between the situation at the time immediately preceding the crisis and any situation following it." And like Descartes, this view of epistemological crisis is false because "it can never be the case that everything is put in question simultaneously."[19]

Like Bernstein, MacIntyre turns to hermeneutics to make sense of this mess. He describes the situation as nothing less than a hermeneutical crisis, a break down of trust in one's schema of interpretation, a situation in which a

---

15 Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* 40.

16 Alasdair MacIntyre "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science" *Paradigms and Revolutions* ed. Gary Gutting (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980) 68.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 54.

19 Ibid., 68.

multiplicity of rival incompatible interpretive schemata or "prescriptions for interpretation" is omnipresent in social life; where "error, deception, self-deception, irony, and ambiguity" are so pervasive as to render reliable reasoning, reasonable action and social life impossible.[20] The natural scientist is like Hamlet at Elsinore "trapped in epistemological circularity" with "too many schemata available for interpretation" unable to interpret the events of which he is already a part. "Until he has adopted some schema he does not know what to treat as evidence; until he knows what to treat as evidence he cannot tell which schema to adopt."[21] Hamlet's problems arise, MacIntyre claims, because he cannot construct a narrative of these events because the "dramatic narrative" of his family and the Kingdom of Denmark through which he identified his own place in society and his relationship to others "has been disrupted by radical interpretive doubts."[22]

Thus, Kuhn's account of radical misunderstanding is connected to a highly conservative situation in which "all justification takes place within a social tradition, and the pressures on such a tradition enforce often unrecognised rules by means of which discrepant pieces of evidence or difficult questions are...put on side with the tacit assent of the scientific community."[23] For these reasons, MacIntyre includes Kuhn in a philosophical framework that includes Edmund Burke and Michael Polanyi, who understand traditions as "essentially conservative and essentially unitary."[24] According to this reading, Kuhn describes a situation of "almost total discontinuity"[25] in which all rationality and judgement are bound by the scientific traditions and

20 Ibid., 54, 55.
21 Ibid., 55-56.
22 Ibid., 56.
23 Ibid., 67.
24 Ibid., 67.
25 Ibid., 70.

scientific communities, in which 'normal scientists' are simply held captive by their respective paradigm and its rules. It is impossible under Kuhn's view to explain how a transition might be made from one tradition to another or how a tradition which had lapsed into incoherence might be reconstructed. MacIntyre therefore agrees with those who label such a transition or a reconstruction not a work of reason but a leap in the dark, or an "evangelical conversion."[26]

MacIntyre turns to a comprehensive language of explanation to rescue Kuhn's account of scientific revolutions from these charges of irrationalism: "dramatic narrative is the crucial form for understanding of human action" and so natural science can be a rational form of inquiry "...if and only if the writing of a true dramatic narrative - that is, of history understood in a particular way - can be a rational activity."[27] This is a neo-Kantian philosophy of history whose aim is to uncover the fundamental "underlying order", the "ontological truth" by means of a "coherent and convergent relationship" of different sciences,[28] where the seemingly incommensurable scientific paradigms are recast, re-written and reconciled in a more comprehensive,

---

26 Ibid., 67, 68.

27 Ibid., 66.

28 "What Kuhn's disregard for ontological truth neglects is the way in which the progress toward truth in different sciences is such that they have to converge. The easy reductionism of some positivist programs for science was misleading here, but the rejection of such a reductionism must not blind us to the necessary convergence of physics, chemistry, and biology. Were it not for ontological truth the nature of our demand for a coherent and convergent relationship between all the sciences would be unintelligible....Kant is essentially right; the notion of an underlying order - the kind of order that we would expect if the ingenious, unmalicious god of Newton and Einstein had created the universe - is a regulative ideal of physics. We do not need to understand this notion quite as Kant did, and our antitheological beliefs may make us uncomfortable in adopting it. But perhaps discomfort at this point is a sign of philosophical progress." Ibid., 73.

"enlarged" or historically 'continuous' narrative.[29] Like Hamlet the practicing scientist can only make sense of the world on the adoption of such a 'dramatic narrative'[30], a schema or instrument of interpretation to ground his understanding.[31] The dramatic narrative reverses the agent's understanding of past events in the light of "present responses to his probing" and this reversal enables the agent to understand "both how he could intelligibly have held his or her original beliefs and how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them."[32]

Two Errors Informed by a Common Picture

The positions of Bernstein and MacIntyre are cited here as examples of two typical errors in the commentaries on Kuhn's essay.[33] On the one hand Kuhn's views make of theory choice a matter of "evangelical conversion": because it is not based on good reasons of any kind, factual or otherwise, the decision by a scientific group to adopt a new paradigm lacks rational foundations. On the other side of this coin, it is said that the scientific

---

29 "It is more rational to accept one theory or paradigm and reject its predecessor when the later theory or paradigm provides a standpoint from which the acceptance, the life-story, and the rejection of the previous theory or paradigm can be recounted in more intelligible historical narrative than previously. An understanding of the concept of superiority of one physical theory to another requires a prior understanding of the concept of the superiority of one historical narrative to another.... What is carried over from one paradigm to another are epistemological ideals and a correlative understanding of what constitutes progress of a single intellectual life. Just as Descartes's account of his own epistemological crisis was only possible by reason of Descartes' ability to recount his own history, indeed to live his life as a narrative about to be cast into a history - an ability which Descartes himself could not recognize without falsifying his own account of epistemological crises -so Kuhn and Feyerabend recount the history of epistemological crises as moments of almost total discontinuity without noticing the historical continuity which makes their own intelligible narratives possible...." Ibid., 70.

30 "I am suggesting...that the best account that can be given of why some scientific theories are superior to others presupposes the possibility of constructing an intelligible dramatic narrative which can claim historical truth...." Ibid., 73.

31 Ibid., 56, 59.

32 Ibid., 56.

33 Kuhn reviews and replies to some of the early reactions to his essay in Kuhn,"Objectivity, Value Judgement and Theory Choice," *Essential Tension* 321-322.

enterprise is hopelessly conservative: in the absence of extra-paradigmatic epistemic standards, or a comprehensive language of explanation, normal scientific practices are realities beyond which no appeal can be made, and the authority of the paradigmatic practice simply prevails.

These errors are informed by a common underlying picture. For both Bernstein and MacIntyre, Kuhn's essay on its own makes no sense without the assistance of a comprehensive theory of meaning or a common langua.^e of historical explanation that unites the variety of scientific practices Kuhn surveys. While they rightfully target for criticism and masterfully reject the misguided Cartesian claim that reason and understanding requires doubting all that undermines apodictic certainty, both Bernstein and MacIntyre go on to defend the equally mistaken claim that what grounds reason and understanding has to be something comprehensive or common, a unifying principle or common language that connects the variety of languages of science. The preferred language of explanation for Bernstein and MacIntyre is hermeneutics and so Kuhn's *Structure* is described in the rules of the language game of hermeneutical theory with its emphasis on interpretation and narrative as the foundations of understanding. The difference between the two philosophers is only that one claims that Kuhn's essay is rational because it contains this comprehensive framework, while the other claims that Kuhn's essay is irrational because it lacks this comprehensive framework.

But the arguments of both Bernstein and MacIntyre contain a common flaw. They are both held captive by a picture that we are always essentially involved, at least implicitly, in interpretation and it is only on the adoption of a unifying language of interpretation that reason and human understanding are possible.This picture of human understanding is based on

Gadamer's claim in *Truth and Method* that interpretation is both essential (ontologically primary) and universal,[34] "not an occasional additional act subsequent to understanding, but rather understanding is always an interpretation."[35] Bernstein's claim that Kuhn's text constitutes a hermeneutical recovery is in this sense, in which 'understanding' is intrinsically linked to 'interpretation',[36] in which, as Gadamer claims, the understanding of a text has "...an essential inner relationship to its interpretation...."[37]

This picture was rejected by Wittgenstein and since the publication of his post-Tractarian writings has come under sustained criticism by Wittgensteinians who point out the crucial differences between Gadamer and Wittgenstein on understanding and meaning. Gadamer's claim that interpretation is essential, that is the foundational way of being in the world, is based on the mistake of conflating interpretation and understanding, the mistake of assuming that understanding involves interpretation in some essential way, or that understanding is the same as interpretation. But Wittgenstein argued that understanding is just the way we are in the world. James Tully explains why this picture is a mistake:

> An interpretation is a reflection on a sign; an opinion or belief about how it should be taken. To interpret a sign is to take it *as* one expression rather than another. In contrast, to understand a sign is not to possess a sedimented opinion about it or to take it *as* something, but to be able to grasp it; that is, to act with it, using it in agreement with customary ways (section 241).... Our conventional understanding of the world *is* just the way we are in the world, "like fish in water" not an

---

34 Gadamer refers to language as "the universal medium" and calls hermeneutics "a universal aspect of philosophy, and not just the methodological basis of the so-called human sciences." Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 432-433.

35 Ibid., 274.

36 See Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* 30-44.

37 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 428.

interpretation of or perspective on it.[38]

As I explained in the previous chapters,Wittgenstein argued that we understand and reason in practice; we command a clear view of the variety of meanings of words in conversation with others about their correct application by comparing standard or customary uses with unfamiliar or unconventional uses, noting the similarities and differences, the criss-crossing family resemblances between our language and other languages. This perspicuous representation or survey of the various uses of words, and not the adoption of some essential explanation or rule for interpretation is what grounds understanding, renders reliable reasoning, reasonable action and social life possible. The consequence of not having a perspicuous representation is a kind of aspect blindness: being held captive by a picture or mistaking an aspect of a picture for the essence of the picture itself. In such cases, the remedy must be to bring unnoticed aspects to a person's awareness, that is to get him to *see* things differently. The aim, Gordon Baker reminds us, "is to effect not merely a change of opinion, but a kind of conversion..."[39]

By 'conversion', Baker does not mean here, (as MacIntyre suggests of Kuhn), that understanding is a process devoid of, or not grounded in, truth or good reasons, but that understanding is a contest of equally justifiable positions. Because understanding is in a sense comparative, the condition of dramatic incomparability describes a rare occasion of severe breakdown in reasoning. Normal understanding is a situation in which conceptual contrasts can be pointed out: we place other ways of seeing things, or other arguments that are equally well justified side-by-side with the thing to be reconsidered, juxtaposing 'the aspect of the use of our words' with another system of

---

38 Tully, "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy" 197.
39 Baker, "*Philosophical Investigations* section 122" 50.

expression real or imagined. '[40] This method of using 'objects of comparison', surrounding our practice with new possibilities (language-games), comparing one aspect with another, questioning, challenging or justifying our position does not guarantee the ability to persuade our interlocutor; the process might simply expose a *possibility* for understanding a phenomenon differently; or it may have the consequence that we actually see matters differently.

Despite its many important similarities with Gadamerian hermeneutics, there is *prima facie* evidence to suggest that Kuhn's philosophy and history of science is deeply grounded in Wittgenstein's way of looking a things. If there is support for this evidence, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* cannot possibly constitute a 'hermeneutical' recovery even in what Bernstein calls the 'weak' sense, to mean a type of sensitive historical reading. Instead it must be read as an example of Wittgenstein's way of seeing things.

Unfortunately there are stumbling blocks on the road to a clearer understanding of Kuhn's Wittgensteinian aspects. We are not helped by the fact that numerous commentaries on Kuhn have neglected or have not noticed these Wittgensteinian aspects or sources of Kuhn's method. The commentaries that have addressed the comparison are disappointing. Bernstein, for example, offers two sentences in a footnote in which Wittgenstein is assimilated into the claim about the recovery of a hermeneutical dimension of science. He argues here that although Kuhn was influenced by Wittgenstein, he does not "fully appreciate that many of Wittgenstein's remarks about rules in the *Philosophical Investigations* challenge Kuhn's interpretation of understanding what is involved in

---

40 Ibid.

following rules and the application of rules."[41] Kuhn employs the term 'rule' in the same way as Descartes' *regulae*, something that can be "stated explicitly in a general or universal form", which is then applied to particular cases. In support of this argument that Kuhn does not understand Wittgenstein, Bernstein appeals to the Wittgenstein scholar Stanley Cavell's *Must We Mean What We Say?*[42] In order to render perspicuous the similarities between Kuhn and Wittgenstein, this misleading aspect is the first thing that requires attention.

In 1958 at the time that Kuhn was writing *Structure* he accepted a year's fellowship at Stanford. He initially produced a draft of a chapter of the essay, but found himself at an impasse in the spring of 1959, unable to explain what he eventually described as 'normal science'. According to Daniel Cedarbaum, Kuhn claims that "Wittgenstein provided the answer" to this impasse:

> Though Kuhn had read a transcript of *The Blue and Brown Books* in 1950, he had not read any of Wittgenstein's other writings before 1959. When he came upon the *Philosophical Investigations* that year, he found in its account of naming the key to the working of normal science for which he had been searching.[43]

Whether or not, as Cedarbaum suggests, Kuhn takes the term 'paradigm' from Wittgenstein is not clear. But what seems unshakeable is the role of Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian philosophy and the influence of the Wittgensteinian scholar Cavell at this important time in the advancement of Kuhn's research. Cedarbaum goes on to say that "perhaps more consequential

---

41 Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* 56. For Bernstein's cursory comparison of Kuhn and Wittgenstein see footnote 23 on page 241-242.

42 Ibid.

43 Daniel G. Cedarbaum, "Paradigms," *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 14. 3 (1983): 188. Important aspects of Cedarbaum's position derives from a conversation with Kuhn on November 26, 1979.

that his actual reading of the *Philosophical Investigations* were Kuhn's frequent conversations with Stanley Cavell, who was at the time writing his doctoral dissertation on Wittgenstein's later philosophy...."[44] In the autobiographical elements of the "Preface" to *Structure* Kuhn acknowledges Cavell's influence in nothing but unequivocal terms: Kuhn states that "a constant source of stimulation and encouragement" to him was the fact that Cavell "should have reached conclusions quite so congruent to my own."[45] He goes on to say that Cavell was:

> the only person with whom I have ever been able to explore my ideas in incomplete sentences. That mode of communication attests an understanding that has enabled him to point me the way through or around several major barriers encountered while preparing my first manuscript.[46]

The picture is now becoming a little clearer. With Kuhn's statement of not having even heard of the word 'hermeneutic', Bernstein rescues his thesis by defending the problematic assumption that Kuhn's approach can be called hermeneutical even though he was "not completely aware of what he [was] doing."[47] But the evidence suggests that Kuhn really was aware of what he was doing. When researching and writing *Structure,* Kuhn read Wittgenstein's later philosophy and participated in an ongoing conversation with one of the few scholars in the United States who was both interested and deeply familiar with Wittgenstein's later work. By cleverly glossing over this acknowledged philosophical agreement between Kuhn and Cavell, the important differences between Kuhn's approach and the hermeneutical approach were hidden, leaving Bernstein free to mischaracterize what is

---

44 Ibid.

45 Kuhn, *Structure* xi.

46 Ibid.

47 Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* 41.

happening in *Structure*. Whether Kuhn understood what he read is of course another question entirely. It is in fact a question of correct application, which I will now turn to. If there is evidence that Kuhn's grammar, his vocabulary, is used in the same or similar manner to Wittgenstein, then both Bernstein's and Macintyre's views will be shown to be mistaken.

III.   Kuhn's Wittgensteinian Commitments: "Let Use *Teach* You Meaning"

In explaining his methodological commitments, Kuhn emphasizes the plural and practical nature of scientific understanding: "an analysis of the development of scientific knowledge must take account of the way science has actually been practiced."[48] But Kuhn also accepts the view that scientific knowledge is "like language" because it is "the common property of a group" and "[to] understand it, we shall need to know the special characteristics of the groups that create and use it."[49] Understanding a scientific practice entails knowing its socially-constituted uses.

In the section entitled " a role for history", Kuhn develops further this practice-oriented philosophy of science. What is new about Kuhn is how he explains differences: the variety of scientific schools are judged neither from the dictates of an historically invariant scientific method (of observation and experience) nor from any other essential or comprehensive criteria of 'science' but what Kuhn calls their "incommensurable ways of seeing the world and of practicing science in it."[50] The implications of this new historical approach is a new image of science, one that displays the historical integrity of an older science in its own time, revealing not the relationship of past views to those of modern science, but rather the relationship of the

---

48 Kuhn," Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research?" 4.
49 Kuhn, *Structure* 210.
50 Ibid., 4.

scientist's view to those of his group, "his teachers, contemporaries, and immediate successors in the sciences."[51]

The concept of 'incommensurability' is meant to highlight an important aspect of the variety of scientific practices that Kuhn examines: different scientific practices are governed by their own internal standards, so there is no scientifically or empirically neutral system of language or concepts to adjudicate and combine the different traditions of science.[52] The best way to understand what Kuhn means by 'incommensurability' is to examine what he means by the claim that science is a rule-governed activity.

> Men whose research is based on shared paradigms are committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice. That commitment and the apparent consensus it produces are prerequisites for normal science, i.e. for the genesis and continuation of a particular research tradition.[53]

In what sense are scientists committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice? The analogy Kuhn uses to illustrate the practical, rule-governed nature of a given scientific research tradition is to compare it to a collection of puzzle-games. The aim of normal scientific practice, we are told in section IV, is almost never to find major substantive novelties of fact or theory (and when successful finds none) nor to test long-accepted beliefs, but to solve puzzles.[54] Like jigsaw and cross-word puzzles, riddles and chess problems, the nature of acceptable or admissible solutions and the steps by which they are to be obtained are restricted by the conventions of the games

---

51 Ibid., 3.

52 I would like to stress that Kuhn is not suggesting that different practices are therefore radically incomparable. I will return to this mistaken view later in the discussion.

53 Kuhn, *Structure* 11.

54 Ibid., 52.

themselves.[55] And so the same criteria that determine when a puzzle has been solved also determine failure.[56] Like Wittgenstein this rule-following exercize cannot be done privately: scientists learn how to solve puzzles through their ongoing participation in the game itself, or the practice in which the rule is customarily used. When a puzzle-solving exercize fails, "only the practitioner is blamed, not his tools."[57] It is in these senses that problems in science are rule-governed:

> If we accept a considerably broadened use of the term 'rule'—one that will occasionally equate it with 'established viewpoint' or with 'precondition'—then the problems accessible within a given research tradition display something much like this set of puzzle characteristics.The man who builds an instrument to determine optical wavelengths must not be satisfied with a piece of equipment that merely attributes particular numbers to particular spectral lines. He is not just an explorer or measurer. On the contrary, he must show, by analyzing his apparatus in terms of the established body of optical theory, that the numbers his instrument produces are ones that enter theory as wave lengths. If some residual vagueness in the theory or some unanalyzed component of his apparatus prevents his completing that demonstration, his colleagues may well conclude that he has measured nothing at all.[58]

So Kuhn sometimes uses the concept 'rule' broadly to mean, precondition, 'admissible solution' or 'established viewpoint'. And he also uses the term 'rule' to mean conceptual ("quasi-metaphysical"), theoretical, instrumental

---

55 Ibid., 37-38, 52, 175.

56 "No puzzle solving enterprise can exist unless its practitioners share criteria which for that group and for that time, determine when a particular puzzle has been solved. The same criteria necessarily determine failure to achieve a solution...."Kuhn, "Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research?" 7.

57 Ibid.

58 Kuhn, Structure 37-38

and methodological commitments.[59] The implication here is that Bernstein is wrong to claim that Kuhn's use of rule-following is the same as Descartes'. His account is mistaken because it misses this variety of ways that Kuhn uses the term.

Furthermore, Bernstein's is also mistaken in suggesting that Kuhn does not fully appreciate Wittgenstein's remarks on rules. The Wittgensteinian resemblance is particularly evident in Kuhn's description of science as an activity that is not necessarily closed by a frontier: following section 68 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Kuhn concludes section IV by cautioning the reader not to be mislead into thinking that science is everywhere circumscribed by rules.

> Though there obviously are rules to which all the practitioners of a scientific specialty adhere at a given time, those rules may not by themselves specify all that the practice of those specialists has in common. Normal science is a highly determined activity, but it need not be entirely determined by rules. That is why, at the start of this essay, I introduced shared paradigms rather than shared rules, assumptions and points of view as the source of coherence for normal research traditions. Rules, I suggest, derive from paradigms, but paradigms can guide research even in the absence of rules.[60]

In section V, entitled "The Priority of Paradigms", Kuhn develops this rule-following position in greater detail. What unites the scientists working in the same field of scientific practices is not a set of common rules, but a shared

---

59 These rules are: 1. explicit statements of scientific law, concepts and theories which limit acceptable solutions, such as Newton's Laws, Maxwell's equations and the laws of statistical thermodynamics; 2.commitments to preferred types of instrumentation (tools for testing knowledge-claims); 3. quasi-metaphysical commitments, such as Descartes' scientific writings that the universe was composed of microscopic corpuscles and that all natural phenomena could be explained in terms of corpuscular shape, size, motion and interaction; 4. finally rules of precision and scrutiny. Ibid., 40-42.

60 Ibid, 42.

paradigm which is not a collection of rules.[61] The paradigm, a "locus of professional commitment", a "constellation of group commitments" a "concrete scientific achievement", a "shared exemplar"[62] is "prior to the various concepts, laws, theories and points of view that may be abstracted from it."[63] The coherence of a research tradition is to be understood neither in terms of unitary common ground (such as comprehensive set of rules), nor a full or standard interpretation or rationalization of it.

> Normal science can be determined in part by the direct inspection of paradigms, a process that is often aided by but does not depend upon the formulation of rules and assumptions. Indeed, the existence of a paradigms need not even imply that any full set of rules exists.[64]

In the footnote to this statement, Kuhn cites Polanyi's claim in *Personal Knowledge* that a scientist's success depends on "tacit knowledge", that is, upon knowledge that is "acquired through practice and that cannot be articulated explicitly."[65] But what is more remarkable than this citation is that to defend this claim that there can be shared paradigms without shared rules, to explain the relation between rules, paradigms and normal science, Kuhn turns to examples in the history of science, and to arguments made by Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Kuhn asks: in the absence of a set of common rules, what restricts the scientist

---

61 Nor is it something that can be reduced to "logically atomic components" Ibid., 11.

62 Ibid., 187.

63 Ibid., 11.

64 Ibid., 44.

65 Ibid. Kuhn's reference here to Polanyi renders somewhat puzzling Macintyre's claim that Kuhn "nowhere acknowledges any such debt". MacIntyre, "Dramatic Narrative" 67.

to a particular normal-scientific tradition?[66] Replying to his own query, Kuhn notes: "Partial answers to these questions were developed by the late Ludwig Wittgenstein. Because that context is both more elementary and more familiar, it will help to consider his form of the argument first."[67] Kuhn then directs the reader to important passages of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Citing pages thirty-one to thirty-six (sections 64-79) Kuhn outlines with impressive philosophical clarity and succinctness Wittgenstein's remarks on language-games, naming and family resemblance:

> What need we know, Wittgenstein asked, in order that we apply terms like 'chair', or 'leaf', or 'game' unequivocally and without provoking argument? That question is very old and has generally been answered by saying that we must know, consciously or intuitively, what a chair, or leaf, or game *is*. We must, that is, grasp some set of attributes that all games and that only games have in common. Wittgenstein, however, concluded that, given the way we use language and the sort of world to which we apply it, there need be no such set of characteristics. Though a discussion of *some* of the attributes shared by a *number* of games or chairs or leaves often helps us learn how to employ the corresponding term, there is no set of characteristics that is simultaneously applicable to all members of the class and to them alone. Instead, confronted with a previously unobserved activity, we apply the term 'game' because what we are seeing bears a close "family resemblance" to a number of the activities that we have previously learned to call by that name. For Wittgenstein, in short, games, and chairs, and leaves are natural families, each constituted by a network of overlapping and crisscross resemblances. The existence of such a network sufficiently accounts for our success in identifying the corresponding object or activity. Only if the families we named overlapped and merged gradually into one another—only, that is, if there were no natural families—would our success in identifying and naming provide evidence for a set of common characteristics corresponding to each of the class names we

---

66 Kuhn, *Structure* 44. In other words, if a variety of research problems and techniques that arise within a single normal-scientific tradition are not united by a some explicit or fully discoverable common set of rules and assumptions, how else can we justify that they are related or connected? Indeed one might wonder how the word 'science' can be used at all if nothing demarcates it from other socially constructed beliefs or myths, if it is not a different variety of social thought.

67 Ibid.

employ.[68]

Kuhn then uses this Wittgensteinian understanding of language to help explain how in the absence of common rules there is nevertheless a relationship among the "various research problems and techniques that arise within a single normal scientific tradition."[69] Another long citation from *Structure* is once again in order here, given the extraordinary application of Wittgenstein to the study of scientific practices and the almost universal neglect that this Wittgensteinian application has received:

> What these have in common is not that they satisfy some explicit or even some fully discoverable set of rules and assumptions that gives the tradition its character and its hold upon the scientific mind. Instead, they may relate by resemblance and by modelling to one or another part of the scientific corpus which the community in question already recognizes as among its established achievements. Scientists work from models acquired through education and through subsequent exposure to the literature often without quite knowing or needing to know what characteristics have given these models the status of community paradigms. And because they do so, they need no full set of rules. The coherence displayed by the research tradition in which they participate may not imply even the existence of an underlying body of rules and assumptions that additional historical or philosophical investigation might uncover. That scientists do not usually ask or debate what makes a particular problem or solution legitimate tempts us to suppose that, at least intuitively, they know the answer. But it may only indicate that neither the question nor the answer is felt to be relevant to their research. Paradigms may be prior to, more binding, and more complete than any set of rules for research that could be unequivocally abstracted from them.[70]

The variety of research problems and techniques that arise within a single normal scientific tradition (a paradigm) are not related by a common set of

---

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 45-46.

rules, (a narrative or interpretation), but "by resemblance" of examples, of conventional practices. A scientific community consists of "practitioners of a scientific specialty" bound together "by common elements in their education and apprenticeship."[71]

These citations from the *Philosophical Investigations* and other similar remarks by Kuhn show an unmistakeable Wittgensteinian grammar: paradigms, normal scientific activities, are language-games, a motley of convention-governed scientific practices that scientists are trained into. Like other language games, we can say that the games of science are played according to such-and-such 'rules' because 'rules' of scientific practices are embedded in these practices, and we can read these rules off from the practice of the games themselves. To be more accurate, Kuhn refers to these embedded rules as examples and "established achievements", which is to say scientific conventions that determine science even in the absence of discoverable or explicitly stated rules. Strictly speaking then, scientists do not learn from explicit rules but scientists learn the game of science "by watching others play"[72].They follow Wittgenstein's injunction: "Let use *teach* you the meaning."[73]

Kuhn gives four reasons in *Structure* for justifying his claim that use teaches the meaning of scientific concepts, not a discoverable set of rules. And these reasons follow arguments made in the passages of the *Philosophical Investigations* just cited: First, there is a "severe difficulty" in discovering the rules that have guided particular normal-scientific traditions and this difficulty, Kuhn claims, is "nearly the same as one the philosopher

---

71 Thomas Kuhn, "Second Thoughts on Paradigms," *Essential Tension* 296.
72 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part *I*, section 54.
73 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II, xi, 212e.

encounters when he tries to say what all games have in common."[74]

The second reason to which the first is really a corollary, "is rooted in the nature of scientific education." Scientists, Kuhn writes, never learn concepts, laws, and theories in the abstract and by themselves. Instead these intellectual tools are from the start encountered "in a historically and pedagogically prior unit that displays them with and through their applications." A new theory is always announced "together with applications to some concrete range of natural phenomena; without them it would not even be a candidate for acceptance...." The process of learning a theory depends upon "the study of applications, including practice problem-solving both with a pencil and paper and with instruments in the laboratory. " Kuhn describes this as a process of "learning by doing" which is not necessarily learning "abstracted rules of the game" since the ability to do successful research can "be understood without recourse to hypothetical rules of the game."[75]

The third reason to suppose that paradigms guide research by direct modelling is Kuhn's observation that normal science can proceed without rules "only so long as the relevant scientific community accepts without question the particular problem-solutions already achieved." In the *Philosophical Investigations* sections 68 and 69, (part of the sections cited earlier by Kuhn), Wittgenstein argues that we can draw a boundary for a special purpose, but except for that special purpose, the boundary is not needed "to make the concept usable". Following this logic, Kuhn remarks that rules become important and the characteristic unconcern about them vanish "whenever paradigms or models are felt to be insecure."[76] In section

---

74 Kuhn, *Structure* 46.
75 Ibid., 46-47.
76 Ibid., 47.

87 Wittgenstein argues that an explanation does not need another explanation (a rule for interpretation for example) in order to be understood, "unless *w e* require it to prevent a misunderstanding." That is, a rule or explanation is necessary, and would serve the purpose of removing or averting a misunderstanding only in very specific cases, such as when a misunderstanding would occur "but for the explanation". "The sign-post is in order" Wittgenstein reminds us "if, under normal circumstances, it fulfils its purpose." Kuhn follows this line of reasoning in his third justification. When scientists disagree about whether the fundamental problems of their field have been solved, "the search for rules gains a function it does not ordinarily possess." However, while paradigms remain secure "they can function without agreement over rationalization or without any attempted rationalization at all."[77]

The fourth reason for "granting paradigms a status prior to that of shared rules and assumptions" is that substituting paradigms for rules makes the diversity of scientific fields and specialities easier to understand.

> Explicit rules, when they exist, are usually common to a very broad scientific group, but paradigms need not be. The practitioners of widely separated fields, say astronomy and taxonomic botany, are educated by exposure to quite different achievements described in very different books. And even men who, being in the same or in closely related fields, begin by studying many of the same books and achievements may acquire rather different paradigms in the course of professional specialization.[78]

Scientists who learn the same rules, for example physical scientists who are taught the laws of quantum mechanics, do not all learn the same applications of these rules "and they are not therefore all affected in the same ways by

---

77 Ibid., 48-49.

78 Ibid., 49.

changes in quantum-mechanical practice."[79]

> In short, though quantum mechanics (or Newtonian dynamics, or electromagnetic theory) is a paradigm for many scientific groups it is not the same paradigm for them all. Therefore it can simultaneously determine several traditions of normal science that overlap without being coextensive. A revolution produced within one of these traditions will not necessarily extend to others as well.[80]

While scientists may have common experiences, they view the world through their own paradigms, "their own research training and practice"[81] which constitutes the way scientists solve problems, and indeed the way they see the world.

Kuhn's Debate with Popper

Kuhn's is therefore a deeply Wittgensteinian philosophy of science. And this aspect of Kuhn's outlook became clearly evident at the 1965 International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science, where Kuhn debated one of Wittgenstein's harshest critics, Karl Popper.[82] Popper's description of science was, at the time of the publication of Kuhn's essay, the conventional view of scientific practices. In this debate Kuhn outlines the areas of agreement and disagreement with Popper and asks the reader not to focus on the "secondary issues" about which his disagreement with Popper is explicit: Kuhn's emphasis on "the importance and deep commitment to tradition" and

---

79 Ibid., 50.

80 Ibid., 50.

81 Ibid., 51.

82 The Colloquium was held at Bedford College, Regent's Park, London, July 11 to 17, 1965. The Colloquium was organized jointly by the British Society for the Philosophy of Science and the London School of Economics and Political Science, under the auspices of the Division of Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science of the International Union of History and Philosophy of Science. The proceedings of the Colloquium were published in four volumes. The fourth volume, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, arises from one symposium (with the same title) held July 13 with Kuhn and Popper among the participants. See "Preface" to Lakatos and Musgrave, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*.

Kuhn's "discontent with the implications of the term 'falsification'."[83] Kuhn insists that what demands attention is not so much "the peripheral area in which our occasional secondary disagreements are to be isolated" but "the central region in which we appear to agree."[84] Where both Kuhn and Popper agree is that an analysis of the development of scientific knowledge must not focus on "the logical structure of the products of scientific research" but must take account of the way science has actually been practiced, the "spirit of actual scientific life" and the history of this life.[85] Where they disagree is on the question of whether there is a foundational or primary practice of science, something that defines the use of the concept 'science'. For Popper there are foundational or primary practices of science, a 'logic' of scientific discovery - 'testing' a procedure that solves outstanding scientific problems, and results in novel theories, and 'learning from our mistakes'. These imperatives are requisites to the revolutions through which science grows.[86] The 'growth' of science, on Popper's view, occurs by the revolutionary overthrow of an accepted theory and its replacement by a better one by means of testing and learning from one's mistakes, by 'conjectures and refutations'.

Kuhn's Wittgensteinian reply to Popper is that he mistakes aspects of science for its essence and so rather than a 'logic', "Sir Karl has provided an ideology."[87] Kuhn's reaction to Popper is not trivial or inconsequential. Kuhn claims that the "largest part" of his thesis in his paper delivered at the International Colloquium was his observation that by emphasizing the 'logic' of discovery, Karl Popper "has erred by transferring selected characteristics of

---

83 Kuhn, "Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research?" 2.
84 Ibid., 3.
85 Ibid., 1.
86 Ibid.,10.
87 Ibid., 15. Kuhn refers to views such as Popper's as "rhetorically induced professionally shared imperatives." Ibid., 22.

everyday research to the occasional revolutionary episodes in which scientific advance is most obvious and by thereafter ignoring the everyday enterprise entirely."[88] In particular, Popper proposes to solve the problem of theory choice during revolutions by logical criteria that are applicable only when conventional or paradigmatic practices can already be presupposed. Both 'testing' and 'learning from our mistakes' are standard features of scientific practices, but the practices they are a part of are *normal* scientific practices; they already presuppose ŗ corpus of accepted knowledge ("current theory"), what is conventionally known. They are not directed against this accepted knowledge, rather "the scientist must *premise* current theory as the rules of his game."[89] As Kuhn puts it, though testing is frequent "in the final analysis, it is the individual scientist rather than current theory which is tested."[90]

Popper fails to recognize that the kind of tests and mistakes that he describes explore the limitations of accepted theory and are therefore "aspects of or occasions for" extraordinary research; consequently he characterizes the entire scientific enterprise in terms that apply to its "occasional revolutionary parts." For Kuhn neither science nor the development of knowledge can be understood if research is viewed exclusively through these aspects and the revolutions they occasionally produce.[91] Kuhn's remarks are not unlike Wittgenstein's comments on Augustine in section 3 of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

> Augustine...does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say in this and many cases where the question arises "Is this an appropriate

---

88 Ibid., 19.
89 Ibid., 4.
90 Ibid., 4-5.
91 Ibid ., 5-6

description or not?" The answer is: "Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you are claiming to describe.

Like Augustine, Popper does describe a procedure of science, only not everything that we call science is this procedure. Kuhn rejects Popper's image of science because Popper mistakes the occasional logical episodes for "the everyday enterprise". What makes the scientific enterprise rational cannot therefore be these mathematical techniques.[92] Neither a clear and distinct proof nor a falsification nor a neutral algorithm for 'testing' can conclusively overthrow or constitute a scientific paradigm. Furthermore, because scientific understanding is rooted in conventional (paradigmatic) understanding, it is precisely the abandonment of testing and critical discourse that marks the maturity of a science, not the adoption of calculi for testing.[93]

This claim that it is puzzle-solving rather than testing a paradigm that marks the maturity of science was met with horror by Kuhn's critics, particularly Popper who refers to the normal scientist as having been "badly taught", having been taught in "a dogmatic spirit", a "victim of indoctrination." Popper calls puzzle-solving an "uncritical approach" in which he sees "a very great danger...a danger to science and, indeed to our civilization."[94] Popper also wonders "whether Kuhn's use of 'puzzle' has anything to do with Wittgenstein's use" to mean that in Philosophy problems are "connected with the improper use of language."[95]

---

92 Kuhn's position is that Popper has sought evaluation procedures which can be applied to theories with"...the apodictic assurance characteristic of the techniques by which one identifies in arithmetic, logic or measurement." Ibid., 13.

93 This is, Kuhn writes, "to turn Sir Karl's view on its head." Ibid., 6.

94 Karl Popper, "Normal Science and its Dangers," Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge, ed. Lakatos and Musgrave 52.

95 Ibid., footnote 1, 53.

Indeed Popper is correct about the family resemblances between the two philosophers (he may be the first to have recognised the connection) and it is partly Popper's mistaken views about Wittgenstein that shapes his equally mistaken views on Kuhn. Kuhn is providing here an anti-Cartesian view that scientific conventions are unquestioned, taken-for-granted forms of thinking and acting that ground scientific understanding. They "must be lived with and explored befcre they can be broken."[96] Like Skinner's 'innovating ideologist', normal scientists practice forms of reflection that in fact rest on and take for granted a whole range of conventions of the language-games in which they think and act. They cannot simply manipulate concepts or conventions to their own ends in a monological or radically reflexive manner. Testing always takes place within some ways of thinking and acting that are taken for granted and not questioned. The 'taken for granted' aspect of human understanding is what Skinner calls 'convention', what Taylor calls 'background', what Kuhn calls a 'paradigm' and what Wittgenstein famously refers to as 'forms of life.' As James Tully has explained, being engaged in 'forms of life' is not some limit that needs to be deconstructed and overcome, nor does it render our knowledge defective in any way. Nor does it mean that we must simply accept our, or any, given form of life, or that accepting a given form of life is a 'dogmatic' or 'uncritical' attitude. The normal scientist occasionally does question her form of life, but in such cases it "involves the acceptance of others and not a transcendental standpoint."[97] In this sense Popper is correct about the connection between Kuhn and Wittgenstein. Kuhn's position is identical to Wittgenstein's in section 105 of *On Certainty*:

---

96 Kuhn, "Reflections on my Critics" *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Lakatos and Musgrave, 242.

97 Tully, "Progress and Scepticism" 276. See my previous chapter, section II.

All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system....The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life.[98]

The 'Essential Tension'

Kuhn's view is unmistakeably an application of Wittgenstein's that understanding is grounded in practice, use, convention and mastering a technique, not in a rule, interpretation or some essential aspect of science. However, while Kuhn's philosophy of science emphasises convention and use, it would be wrong to suggest that this alone is what distinguishes his philosophy and history of science from Popper's. Throughout *Structure*, and his other writings, Kuhn is careful to remind his readers that there are two important aspects to the growth of knowledge in the sciences. On the one hand "an apparently arbitrary element, compounded of personal and historical accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given time." On the other hand, that element of arbitrariness is not an indication that "any scientific group could practice its trade without some set of received beliefs."[99] Following Wittgenstein's remarks in the *Blue and Brown Books* and the *Philosophical Investigations* Kuhn's history and philosophy of science is based on the view that scientists understand scientific concepts by actually using them through "rigorous and rigid" training, mastering techniques as result of an "educational initiation that prepares and licenses the student for professional practice." But it is also a claim that scientists retain "an element of arbitrary" and this also has "an important effect on scientific development." Normal science "repeatedly goes astray" and this leads to extraordinary investigations

---

98 *On Certainty* section 105. Consider also sections 27-29 where Wittgenstein discusses the connection between 'making a mistake' in applying a rule. "Practice in the use of the rule also shews what is a mistake in its employment." Ibid., 29.

99 Kuhn, *Structure* 4.

that lead the profession to a new set of commitments, "a new basis for the practice of science."[100]

These two aspects of the game of science, convention and innovation, were aspects of Kuhn's philosophy of science well before the publication of *Structure* and are no more clearly articulated than in an article published in 1959, appropriately entitled "The Essential Tension: Tradition and Innovation in Scientific Research." This is one of Kuhn's first attempts to call into question a prevailing convention about scientific process and the scientist, the Popperian image that science is characterized by "divergent thinking",[101] that the scientist must be an innovator, that the scientist "must possess mental flexibility." Kuhn does not deny that much of this popular stereotype is correct, that some divergence characterizes all scientific work, only that it misses "the other face of this same coin."[102] Flexibility and open-mindedness have been too exclusively emphasized as the characteristics requisite for basic research. Kuhn therefore suggests that "convergent thinking is just as essential to scientific advance as is divergent." Furthermore, "[since] these two modes of thought are inevitably in conflict, it will follow that the ability to support a tension that can occasionally become almost unbearable is one of the prime requisites for the very best sort of scientific research."[103] The scientist is a firm traditionalist (a convergent thinker) as well as an innovator (a divergent thinker). Employing his newly-discovered Wittgensteinian vocabulary, Kuhn puts it as follows:

> ...I hope to have made meaningful the view that the productive scientist must be a traditionalist who enjoys playing intricate games by

---

100 Ibid., 5-6.

101 Kuhn, "The Essential Tension: Tradition and Innovation in Scientific Research," *Essential Tension* 226.

102 Ibid., 236, 237.

103 Ibid., 226.

pre-established rules in order to be a successful innovator who discovers new rules and new pieces with which to play them.[104]

Scientific development is not an exclusive disjunction of convention or innovation, but a contest of both aspects. Therefore, those like MacIntyre who say that Kuhn emphasizes 'normal science' and paradigms, and who accuse Kuhn of subscribing to an ultra-conservative community-based philosophy of science miss this second important aspect of Kuhn's view, that science is also critical discussion of alternatives. It is most likely the polemical nature of Kuhn's essay that is the source of this blindness: Kuhn meant to call into question Popper's view that science is only 'conjectures and refutations', the revolutionary overthrow of theories, by creative new ones. Because this was the prevailing view Kuhn's argument emphasizes the missing aspect, namely convention. But it is important to recognize that Kuhn does repeatedly affirm Popper's insights: science is not just tradition or revolution but both: "a succession of tradition-bound periods punctuated by non-cumulative breaks."[105]

IV. Seeing Aspects/ 'Ways of Seeing'

My argument has so far been directed to two points. It first outlined a picture that Kuhn's essay on its own makes no sense without the assistance of a comprehensive theory of meaning or a unifying language of historical explanation, a picture that is constituted by a Gadamerian picture and a

---

104 Ibid., 237.

105 Kuhn, *Structure* 208. Feyerabend's criticism of Kuhn seems closest to a Wittgensteinian counter-argument. Feyerabend claims that science is the juxtaposition, the active interplay, between alternative views and tenaciously held views; not a normal *period* and a *period* of proliferation - but their interaction. "Proliferation and tenacity do not belong to successive periods of history, but are always copresent." Paul Feyerabend "Consolations for the Specialist"*Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* ed. Lakatos and Musgrave 211, 212. Feyerabend's seems to be a difference of emphasis of Kuhn's claim that science is an essential tension of tradition and innovation.

blindness to the Wittgensteinian aspects of Kuhn's account. I then provided evidence that Kuhn was directly influenced by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, that his account accepts the basic assumptions of the language-games argument. This games approach leads Kuhn to conclude that use and training teaches meaning and that science is a rational process even in the absence of a comprehensive theory that unites its various elements, or an ideal set of rules that may be abstracted from this game; what connects scientists are the family resemblances, and overlapping criss-crossing similarities and differences of the "incommensurable ways of seeing the world and of practicing science in it."

Let me now shift to another approach which is to compare the grammar of both authors to show their close family resemblances. In another remarkable part of his essay, section X, entitled "Revolutions as Changes in World View", Kuhn develops an argument about ways of seeing and thereby articulates the second important family resemblance between his approach and Wittgenstein's. It is in his defense of the innovative use of the concept of 'seeing' that Kuhn distinguishes his essay from a traditionally hermeneutical work and shows why it is neither an example of the recovery of the hermeneutical dimension of science, nor the irrational congeries of scientific traditions in need of a unifying theory. Kuhn presents in this chapter the controversial claim that a paradigm is a way of seeing and a paradigm change is a shift in scientific perception. A review of Wittgenstein's position will reveal important similarities.

Wittgenstein's Comparison of Understanding and Seeing

In Part II, section xi of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein compares meaning and understanding to visual experiences. He reviews the word 'to see' and surveys the similarities and differences of four different

uses: 'continuous seeing'(or just 'seeing'), 'seeing differently', 'seeing as' and 'interpreting'. In order to illustrate these differences,Wittgenstein considers a variety of games and a variety of figures ("picture-objects") such as a box, a duck-rabbit figure derived from Jastrow, a 'picture-face' that resembles a human face, a convex step (a straight line drawn through the geometric centres of the two surfaces), a 'double-cross' (a white cross on a black ground and a black cross on a white ground).[106] Wittgenstein uses these puzzle-pictures of gestalt theory to show his imaginary interlocutor the variety of ways that 'see' is used. The gestalt puzzles help unravel the various uses of 'to see' and illustrate how we can be held captive by a customary way of seeing things, how we can in other words be held captive by specific uses of words and so can be blind to the variety meanings of words. When we mistake what is seen for "a state of affairs of the highest generality",[107] when we describe our particular way of seeing as an 'insight' into the essence of phenomena, in these cases a picture becomes an "unshakeable ideal", something we can never get outside of. There is a kind of enslavement - a picture holds us captive.[108] Being held captive by a picture, a way of seeing, is a kind of myopia. Seeing the picture uniquely as a rabbit, not escaping the picture's grasp or 'what is seen', (failing to see the picture as a duck, failing to see the two crosses), is 'aspect-blindness', the failure to 'notice an aspect'.

But this experience of aspect seeing is not typical, it does not describe customary seeing. For example, when we see a familiar object, such as a table or a rabbit, we do not see it *as* a table or *as* a rabbit. We see a table. But if I meet someone from another culture who has no word for 'table' or 'rabbit' because this culture has no use for tables or has no rabbits; if this interlocutor called

---

106 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II, xi,194e, 203e, 207e.

107 Ibid., Part I, section 104.

108 "A *picture* held us captive, and we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."Ibid., section 115.

my table an altar and called my rabbit a wallaby in their language, then we could say that I see it as a table and she sees it as an altar, and I see it as a rabbit and she sees it as a wallaby.[109] But customarily we do not see a familiar object *as* something or take what we know *as* something.

> It would have made as little sense for me to say "Now I am seeing it as..."as to say at the sight of a knife and fork "Now I am seeing this as a knife and fork". This expression would not be understood.—Any more than: "Now it's a fork" or "It can be a fork too". One doesn't *take* what one knows as the cutlery at a meal for cutlery; any more than one ordinarily tries to move one's mouth as one eats, or aims at moving it.[110]

The experience of noticing an aspect then,"only comes at the moment of change from duck to rabbit and back. In between, the aspect is as it were dispositional."[111] To see 'continuously' (or simply 'to see'), is a customary way of seeing and understanding. To see differently is to overcome the unique conceivability of the picture - a new or innovative way of seeing and understanding; To see is not the same to 'see as'. The latter is an interpretation, but "seeing is a state",[112] seeing is a disposition. Seeing differently, then, is not adopting a new interpretation (seeing it now as something different) but having a different disposition, experiencing a different state; having a different customary way of understanding or understanding the world in a way that rivals what was previously understood. On the other hand, seeing something as something occurs in specific cases where our customary way of seeing, our disposition, is

---

109 The example of the table is quoted in John Heaton and Judy Groves *Wittgenstein for Beginners* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1994) 153.

110 *Philosophical Investigations.*, Part II, xi, 195e.

111 This quote, from the notes taken by P.T. Geach, is quoted in Monk, *Duty of Genius,* 507-508. As Monk states these notes together with those of the same lectures taken by other students, have been published as *Wittgenstein's Lectures on Philosophical Psychology 1946-7.* See "p. 500" in Monk, *Duty of Genius* 631.

112 *Philosophical Investigations,* Part II, xi, 212e.

questioned, challenged or justified or when we compare our understanding to one that is unfamiliar.

In such cases, when our way of seeing things changes because it is challenged or questioned or some aspect of it is brought to light, the alteration in the state of seeing is what Wittgenstein calls "noticing an aspect" and seeing differently.[113] This event is almost always described as a *sudden* transformation such as the 'dawning' of an aspect and "the flashing of an aspect".[114]

> I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience "noticing an aspect."[115]

When we see a picture differently or notice an aspect, the question that arises for Wittgenstein is what changes? Is it correct say that the picture itself actually alters and changes, becoming something else, or are we simply interpreting the same picture differently? Wittgenstein's reply is that seeing differently is not akin to interpreting what I see in a different way, but describing what is seen in a way "as if" the object itself had changed. Wittgenstein tells us:

> The change of aspect. "But surely you would say that the picture is all together different now!"But what is different: my impression? My point of view?—Can I say? I describe the alteration like a perception; quite as if the object had altered before my eyes.[116]

Wittgenstein also writes:

---

113 Ibid., Part II, xi, 193e, 195e.
114 Ibid., Part II, xi, 194e, 197e.
115 Ibid., Part II, xi, 193e.
116 Ibid., Part II, xi, 195e.

But the expression in one's voice and gestures is the same as if the object had altered and had ended by *becoming* this or that.[117]

This distinction between 'seeing' and 'seeing as' helps to unravel the differences between understanding and interpreting and why a change of understanding is not the same as a change of interpretation. This conflation of interpretation and understanding is a mistake that Wittgenstein tries to expose. They are similar, but not synonymous:

> Do I really see something different each time, or do I only interpret what I see in a different way? I am inclined to say the former. But why?—To interpret is to think, to do something; seeing is a state.

> Now it is easy to recognize cases in which we are *interpreting*. So there is a similarity in the use of "seeing" in the two contexts. Only do not think that you knew in advance what the "*state* of seeing" means here! Let use *teach* you the meaning.[118]

Earlier I noted Baker's claim that the aim of a perspicuous representation is not merely a change of opinion. We now know that because seeing is not an opinion or interpretation but a state, then understanding the meaning of a concept is not seeing it *as* something but understanding its correct usage, grasping what can and cannot be done with it being able to apply it in agreement with customary or conventional ways. Changing someone's understanding or state of seeing is partly the consequence of persuasion and debate: about the correct use, or application, of concepts, about whether a concept agrees with conventional criteria of correctness. The aim of this Wittgensteinian method is to change the aspect under which certain things are seen by means of various techniques of persuasion.[119]

---

117 Ibid., Part II, xi, 206e.

118 Ibid., Part II, xi, 212e.

119 See Monk, *Duty of Genius* 508.

Kuhn on Seeing : 'To See' is not 'To See As'

Like Wittgenstein, Kuhn turns to gestalt theory to describe paradigmatic change and adopts the same distinctions as those outlined by Wittgenstein, namely 'seeing' (a paradigmatic way of seeing), 'seeing differently', (the adoption of a rival paradigm) and 'interpreting' (seeing something *as*).

Kuhn compares the transition from one paradigm in crisis to a new one (the growth in scientific understanding) to a change in visual gestalt: "What were ducks in the scientist's world before the revolution are rabbits afterwards."[120] But Kuhn is also quick to point out that this comparison can be misleading:

> Scientists do not see something *as* something else; instead they simply see it. We have already examined some of the problems created by saying that Priestly saw oxygen as dephlogisticated air. In addition the scientist does not preserve the gestalt subject's freedom to switch back and forth between ways of seeing.[121]

The point Kuhn makes is that the gestalt experiment illustrates "only the nature of perceptual transformations" but tells us nothing about the role of paradigms or of previously assimilated experience in the process of perception.They do not show how what is perceived varies with training and experience, and so how "something like a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself."[122] Gestalt experiments cannot be more than suggestive because the subject of a gestalt demonstration knows his perception has shifted, he can make it shift back and forth repeatedly learning to see the

---

120 Kuhn, *Structure* 111.

121 Ibid., 85.

122 Ibid., 112-113. "What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see. In the absence of such training there can only be, in William James's phrase, a "bloomin' buzzin' confusion." Ibid., 113.

duck-rabbit figure alternatively "*as* a duck and *as* a rabbit."[123] Scientists do not switch back and forth like the gestalt subject. If perceptual switches accompany paradigm changes, "we may not expect scientists to attest the these changes directly."

> Looking at the moon, the convert to Copernicanism does not say, "I used to see a planet, but now I see a satellite." That locution would imply a sense in which the Ptolemaic system had once been correct. Instead, a convert to the new astronomy says, "I once took the moon to be (or saw the moon as) a planet but I was mistaken."[124]

The historian may not detect "direct testimony" about the shift in scientific vision, so would have to look at the actual practices of the scientists (the "indirect and behavioural evidence") for evidence that the scientist with a new paradigm sees differently from the way he had seen before." And this evidence abounds: Galileo's experiments with swinging stones; Sir William Herschel's discovery of Uranus; Lavoisier's chemical experiments. In the various examples of the history of astronomy, electricity and chemistry, Kuhn finds rough parallels to gestalt in the scientists' reports on what they saw: Galileo saw a pendulum where Aristotle saw a constrained fall; Hershel and Lexell saw a planet where others saw a star; Lavoisier saw oxygen where Priestly saw dephlogisticated air.[125] These are but a few examples of paradigm-induced changes in scientific perception, cases in which the scientists "saw differently"cases that can be described as "paradigm-induced gestalt switches."[126]

The paradigm changes are described as the "revolutionary transformation of

---

123 Ibid.,114.
124 Ibid., 115.
125 All quotes, Ibid.
126 Ibid., 116, 118, 119, 120.

vision"[127] "shifts in perception"[128], the "shift of scientific vision" and seeing differently.[129] It in this gestalt sense that after a revolution "the historian of science may be tempted to exclaim that when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them."[130] This may be, as Rorty suggests, "idealistic-sounding"[131] but it is not an idealist thesis. It is an attempt to characterize the way scientists experience a new way of seeing things: "though the world does not change with a change of paradigm, the scientist afterward works in a different world."[132]

> Of course...there is no geographical transplantation; outside of the laboratory everyday affairs usually continue as before. Nevertheless, paradigm changes do cause scientists to see the world of their research-engagement differently. In so far as their only recourse to that world is through what they see and do, we may want to say that after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world.[133]

While acknowledging the explanatory limitations of the gestalt vocabulary, Kuhn nevertheless argues that the "switch of gestalt" provides a "useful elementary prototype" for what occurs in a full-scale paradigm shift. He does not propose a full or identical comparison between the observations of

---

127 Ibid., 112, 118.

128 Ibid., 113.

129 For example Kuhn notes, "...the electrician looking at a Leyden jar saw something different from what he had seen before." Ibid., 118.

130 "Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking at familiar instruments in places they have looked before. It is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to another planet where familiar objects are seen in a different light and are joined by familiar ones as well. " Ibid., 111.

131 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* 324.

132 Kuhn, *Structure* 121, 135.

133 Ibid. As Baker writes of Wittgenstein, Kuhn's procedure "parallels bringing someone to notice a new aspect of the duck-rabbit diagram by surrounding the figure with other picture-rabbits....In both cases there is an inclination to exclaim: 'Nothing has changed, yet everything looks different! Baker,"Section 122" 50.

scientists and the gestalt psychologist's experimental subjects, but claims that there is much to gain from such a suggestive analogy. "If we can be content with the everyday use of the verb 'to see', we may quickly recognize that we have already encountered many other examples of the shifts in scientific perception that accompany paradigm change."[134]

Kuhn on Seeing: 'To See' is not 'To Interpret'

The second important distinction Kuhn makes in section X, like Wittgenstein, is between seeing differently and interpreting differently. Do we really need to describe what separates Galileo from Aristotle, or Lavoisier from Priestly, as a transformation of vision, Kuhn asks? "Did these men really *see* different things when *looking at* the same sort of objects? Is there any legitimate sense in which we can say that they pursued their research in different worlds?"[135]

> Many readers will surely want to say that what changes with a paradigm is only the scientist's interpretation of observations that themselves are fixed once and for all by the nature of the environment and of the perceptual apparatus. On this view, Priestly and Lavoisier both saw oxygen, but they interpreted their observations differently; Aristotle and Galileo saw pendulums, but they differed in their interpretations of what they both had seen....[136]

It is necessary at this point to explain that Kuhn considers 'interpretation' to be part of "the traditional epistemological paradigm" and "an essential part of

---

134 Kuhn, *Structure* 117. "It is as elementary prototypes for these transformations of the scientist's world that the familiar demonstrations of a switch in visual gestalt prove so suggestive. What were ducks in the scientists's world before the revolution are rabbits afterwards....Transformations like these, though usually more gradual and almost always irreversible, are common concomitant of scientific training. " Ibid., 111.

135 Ibid., 120.
136 Ibid., 120-121.

a philosophical paradigm initiated by Descartes."[137] The argument he provides against interpretation is based on a rejection of what he considers to be a false assumption: that data are "individual and stable". Since data are not unequivocally stable, he argues, scientists cannot 'interpret'.[138] In this way Kuhn's use of 'interpretation' is very different from the Gadamerian sense where interpretation is about a purposive subject (a subject for whom things have meaning), not a stable object. So, at least in one sense, Kuhn's rejection of 'interpretation' cannot be seen as a rejection of Gadamerian hermeneutics.

However, there is another way in which Kuhn's statements can be understood. Kuhn might be using 'interpretation' in the same sense as Wittgenstein to mean an explanation that assists the conventional view in order to be understood. If this is what he means, then Kuhn is in fact rejecting Gadamerian hermeneutics, since his view is that the only misunderstanding that an interpretation serves to remove or avert is one that would occur but for the interpretation, "not...", as Wittgenstein says in the *Philosophical Investigations* section 87, "...every one that I can imagine."

This way of reading Kuhn's use of interpretation (as an occasional tool for understanding) has textual support. First, Kuhn argues that interpretations presuppose the language-games they assist; it is acting that lies at the bottom of a scientific language-game, not an interpretation of it. Kuhn does not deny

---

137 Ibid., 121.

138 "A pendulum is not a falling stone, nor is oxygen dephlogisticated air. Consequently, the data that scientists collect from these diverse objects are...themselves different." Ibid., 121. While recognizing that this view is "neither all wrong nor a mere mistake", Kuhn points to the failure of this paradigm made apparent by convergent contemporary research in "parts of philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and even art history" and "the historical study of science" such as his own essay. Without being able to produce a "viable alternative" to the epistemological paradigm, Kuhn recognizes the difficulties created by saying that scientists look at the same objects but see differently, that the scientist afterward works in a different world. Nevertheless, Kuhn is convinced that these statements make sense, and "[what] occurs during a scientific revolution is not fully reducible to a reinterpretation of individual and stable data." Ibid.

that scientists characteristically interpret observations and data, but "...each of these interpretations presupposed a paradigm." Interpretations are part of normal science, but their aim is "to refine, extend, and articulate a paradigm that is already in existence." While there are many examples of the interpretive enterprise, "...that interpretive enterprise...can only articulate a paradigm, not correct it."[139]

Second, both Kuhn and Wittgenstein suggest that the process by which either the individual or community makes the transition from one paradigm or convention to another (from constrained fall to the pendulum or from dephlogisticated air to oxygen) is not one that resembles interpretation. Rather than being an interpreter, "the scientist who embraces a new paradigm is like the man wearing inverting lenses, [confronting] the same constellation of objects as before and knowing that he does so, he nevertheless finds them transformed through and through in many of their details."[140] The alteration in the state of seeing is more like having a different disposition, as a result of "a relatively sudden and unstructured event like the gestalt switch." Kuhn writes:

> Scientists then often speak of the "scales falling from the eyes" or of the "lightning flash" that "inundates" a previously obscure puzzle, enabling its components to be seen in new way that for the first time permits its solution....No ordinary sense of the terms 'interpretation' fits these flashes of intuition through which a new paradigm is born. Though such intuitions depend upon the experience, both anomalous and congruent, gained with the old paradigm, they are not logically or piecemeal linked to particular items of that experience as an interpretation would be. Instead, they gather up large portions of that experience and transform them to the rather different bundle of

---

139 Ibid., 122. The sentence continues:"Paradigms are not corrigible by normal science at all. Instead, as we have already seen, normal science ultimately leads only to the recognition of anomalies and to crises."

140 Ibid., 121-122.

experience that will thereafter be linked piecemeal to the new paradigm.[141]

What I hope is clear is how similar Kuhn's remarks are to Wittgenstein's. Seeing something is not the same as seeing it as something; to see is not to interpret; seeing differently is being in on a new set of conventional practices. Being held captive by a way of seeing is a blindness: "We predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it."[142] Our inability to see other aspects of a picture or use a word differently is like wearing a pair of glasses "...through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off."[143]

Kuhn's discussion in section X owes far more to the psychological literature stemming from the field of gestalt psychology than it does to Wittgenstein. It is "the pioneering work of the Hanover Institute"[144] that Kuhn has in mind in the discussion on the nature of visual transformations. What I have sought to do here is show Kuhn's similarities with the issues that preoccupied Wittgenstein, issues that also owe much to gestalt psychology which found their final expression in what now forms Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*.[145] Both Kuhn and Wittgenstein turn to this field of psychology to help with their claim that 'seeing differently' is not the same as interpreting differently and furthermore that interpretations are subordinate to conventional practices, which is to say, language-games and paradigms.

---

141 Ibid., 122-123.

142 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, section 104.

143 Ibid., Part I, section 103.

144 Ibid., Part I, 112.

145 Ray Monk provides a clear explanation of the role that gestalt psychology played in Wittgenstein's notion of a survey, in *Duty of Genius* 507-510.

What I hope is clear from this comparison is that Kuhn's views on 'seeing' and 'interpretation' are not just, as Rorty suggests, unfortunate "incidental remarks" or an "idealistic account of the malleability of the mirrored world." Rorty argues that Kuhn's views on seeing aspects is something we should put aside in order to simply focus on his views that no algorithm for theory choice is available. His suggestion that "Kuhn should have simply discarded the epistemological project altogether" rather than trying to articulate a viable alternative misses some of the most revolutionary aspects of both Kuhn's and Wittgenstein philosophy.[146]

V. The Comparison of Differences

I have been arguing that *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is a survey of the various languages of scientific knowledge and the groups of practitioners who create and use such languages. It is an historical explanation of scientific practices and of various languages of science. Partly because of the emphasis on the differences of scientific practices, the incommensurable conventions of these various practices, some have labelled Kuhn's essay irrational: he cannot explain how a transition might be made from one tradition to another (such a transition is a matter of "evangelical conversion" not reason) and he cannot explain what grounds a scientific community's decision to adopt a new paradigm.

Now that the Wittgensteinian aspects of Kuhn's position are visible, it is clear why these charges are so erroneous. Kuhn uses the concept of 'incommensurability' to call into question the longstanding positivist convention of a scientifically or empirically neutral system of language or concepts to adjudicate the different traditions of science. But it does not follow

---

146 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* 324-325.

from this claim (and Kuhn is not suggesting) that incommensurable practices are radically incomparable.[147]

Furthermore, just because there is no neutral framework for the adjudication of differences, does not entail that no kind of adjudication is possible at all. Both these assumptions (incomparability and non-adjudication) are driven by the picture I have been discussing at length — our craving for generality — the view that what grounds reason and understanding has to be something comprehensive, common or essential, a unitary language of explanation. Kuhn as I have been arguing rejects this view and inst2ad argues for a 'language-games' approach to understanding scientific practices and the growth of knowledge. To call this approach irrational is a mistake. As Kuhn himself argues:

> Our view of what it is to be rational depends in significant ways, though not of course exclusively, on what we take to be the essential aspects of scientific behaviour. That is not to say that any scientist behaves rationally at all times, or even that many behave rationally very much of the time. What it does assert is that, if history or any other empirical discipline leads us to believe that the development of science depends essentially on behaviour that we have previously thought to be irrational, then we should conclude not that science is irrational, but that our notion of rationality needs adjustment here and there.[148]

What Kuhn means is that the history of science can be understood in the

---

147"Most Readers of my text have supposed that when I spoke of theories as incommensurable, I meant that they could not be compared. But 'incommensurability' is a term borrowed from mathematics, and it there has no such implication...In applying the term 'incommensurability' to theories, I had intended only to insist that there was no common language within which both could be fully expressed and which could therefore be used in a point-by-point comparison between them." Kuhn, "Theory Change as Structure Change: Comments on the Sneed Formalism," *Erkenntnis* 10 (1976): 190-91. Cited in Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* 80.

148 Kuhn "Notes on Lakatos" *PSA 1970, in Memory of Rudolf Carnap*, ed. Roger C. Buck and Robert S. Cohen. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, no. 8 (Dordrecht: Holland, D Reidel, 1971), 144. Quoted in MacIntyre "Dramatic Narrative" 69 and Bernstein "Beyond Objectivism and Relativism" 59.

absence of an essential or a narrative standpoint, and this can be rational process. So MacIntyre's 'narrative' view is itself another picture and his proposal to reject Kuhn's 'resemblance' view of history, entails acceptance of , (as he himself acknowledges), the acceptance of another particular view, not an 'enlarged' historical standpoint.

Not only is MacIntyre's picture erroneous but it simply cannot be used to rescue Kuhn. Paradigms are not rule-bound categories but "natural families" or "perceptually discontinuous categories" with family resemblances: "a class whose members resemble each other more closely than they resemble the members of other natural families."[149] The scope and content of these categories are impossible to specify precisely, and not "once and for all". Like Wittgenstein's family resemblance concepts, Kuhnian paradigms exhibit multifarious relationships. Kuhn explains, for example, that the transition from a paradigm in crisis to a new one from which a new tradition of normal science can emerge is not a cumulative process, (not an "articulation" or "extension" of the old paradigm) but a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals. During the reconstruction period "there will be a large but never complete overlap between the problems that can be solved by the old and new paradigm, but there will also be a decisive difference in the modes of solution."[150] Paradigms are categories drawn for specific purposes and their connections (pre- and post-revolutionary) are far from irrational; on the contrary, their family resemblances and criss-crossing similarities and differences are "sound knowledge" and provide "a basis for rational

149 Kuhn, "Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research" 17. See also pages 14 and 15. Kuhn describes here the history of electrical research in the first half of the eighteenth century, a period prior to the adoption of a paradigm, in which the views and experiments about the nature of electricity were joined by "family resemblance."

150 Kuhn, *Structure* 84-85.

action."[151] Macintyre's claim that Kuhn depicts a picture of complete disagreement, total discontinuity, in which paradigms are "essentially conservative and essentially unitary" flies in the face of this evidence.

Kuhn's method, like Wittgenstein's, is a comparison of similarities and differences of this variety of scientific conventions. In spite of the pleas of his critics who demand that he provide rules for comparison and for theory-choice Kuhn's position is consistent. He is critical of scientists and philosophers of science who demand such calculi insisting instead on his orientation to the activity of science rather than an ideal abstraction of its rules.

A Kind of Language of Contrast: Evaluating Incommensurables

Because the correct application of a scientific term is given by its customary use, and because use varies; because there is no necessary and sufficient condition for the applicability of a word or phrase;[152] because there is no neutral algorithm for theory-choice, no common language to unite competing theories, Kuhn concludes that an explanation must in the final analysis, be "psychological or sociological":

> It must, that is, be a description of a value system, an ideology, together with an analysis of the institutions through which that system is transmitted and enforced. Knowing what scientists value, we may hope to understand what problems they will undertake and what choices they will make in particular circumstances of conflict. I doubt that there is another sort of answer to be found.[153]

Kuhn therefore employs a language of contrast, of perspicuous representation

---

151 Ibid.

152 Kuhn, "Second Thoughts on Paradigms" 316, footnote 21.

153 Kuhn,. "Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research?" 21.

to describe why some scientific ideas prevail over others. This is a language of "techniques of persuasion", argument and counter-argument and "deliberative processes."[154] There is evidence that Kuhn sees the deliberative process in the same way as Wittgenstein, as a survey. For example he states that "the decision to reject one paradigm is always simultaneously the decision to accept another, and the judgement leading to that decision involves the comparison of both paradigms with nature *and* each other."[155] Furthermore, a new paradigm "does not have to conflict with any of its predecessors" and in principle, "a new phenomenon might emerge without reflecting destructively upon any part of past scientific practice..."[156] Kuhn even envisages rare situations under which two paradigms can coexist peacefully.[157]

Paradigms can be compared and contrasted on the basis of their overlapping similarities and overall differences, like two participants in a communication breakdown who use the same vocabulary but apply it differently.[158] In such a

---

154 Kuhn, *Structure* 152 and 195.

155 Ibid., 77.

156 "...a new theory does not have to conflict with any of its predecessors. It might deal exclusively with phenomena not previously known, as the quantum theory deals...with subatomic phenomena unknown before the twentieth century. Or again, the new theory might be simply a higher level theory than those known before, one that linked together a whole group of lower level theories without substantially changing any....Still other compatible relationships between old and new theories can be conceived. " Ibid., 95.

157 Ibid., ix.

158 Bernstein agrees with this view of Kuhn's "incommensurability thesis" but reaches conclusions different from my own. See his treatment of incommensurability in Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* 79-83. Bernstein writes: "There is always some overlap between rival paradigms—overlap of observations, concepts, standards, and problems. If there were not such overlap, rational debate and argumentation between proponents of rival paradigms would not be possible. Kuhn's detractors have criticized him for failing to realize this, but there is plenty of textual evidence to show that Kuhn himself effectively makes this point. In fact, what he wants to single out in his talk about incommensurability is an important feature of this overlap." Ibid., 84-85. Bernstein however, accepts a view by Gerald Doppelt that it is "the incommensurability of *problems* and *standards* —not incommensurability of meanings—that constitutes the most basic thesis of Kuhn." Ibid., 85. But it is incorrect to suggest that 'incommensurability' is not about meaning variance. If we follow Wittgenstein, differences about problems and standards are partly differences

case Kuhn proposes a strategy which the participants attempt "to experience vicariously something of the merits and defects of each other's points of view...."[159] With this strategy, participants would "recognize each other as members of different language communities", consider their difference and shared everyday vocabularies, "refrain from explaining anomalous behaviour as mere error or madness", learn to translate the other's theory and its consequences into his own language and simultaneously to describe in his language the world to which that theory applies.[160]

Persuasion is not a substitute for a calculus for choosing, nor does it guarantee 'conversion', but it is nevertheless based on good reasons - it is certainly not a synonym for mob psychology. New paradigms do not triumph "through some mystical aesthetic", Kuhn insists. "Because scientists are reasonable men, one or another argument will ultimately persuade many of them."[161] Persuasion is a practical ability to convince someone that one's own view is superior.[162] And as "argument piles on argument and as challenge after challenge is successfully met, only blind stubbornness can at the end account for continued resistance."[163]

about the application of a concept and so are in fact differences about meaning. Kuhn himself accepts this view: "In the transition from one theory to the next words change their meanings or conditions of applicability in subtle ways." Kuhn, "Reflections on my Critics" 266.

159 Kuhn, *Structure* 202.

160 Ibid.

161 Kuhn, *Structure* 240. Quoted in Bernstein, "Beyond Objectivism and Relativism" 240 footnote 9.

162 Kuhn, Structure 203.

163 Ibid., 204. However, like ideologies, the reasons why scientists embrace a new paradigm (that is what persuasive arguments work) has to be "for all sorts of reasons and usually for several at once." Kuhn, *Structure* 152. These include non-scientific reasons such as idiosyncrasies of personality and nationality. The new paradigm must also satisfy prevailing truth-conditions: it must seem better than its competitors, it must solve all the puzzles that have been treated by a predecessor Kuhn, "Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research?" 20 and *Structure* 153; but "it need not, and in fact never does, explain all the facts with which it can be confronted." Kuhn, *Structure* 17-18. Occasionally, adopting a new paradigm can mean sacrificing explanatory power in order to achieve the gains that a new theory offers. Kuhn, "Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research?" 20.

VI. Conclusion

Despite its many important similarities with hermeneutics, in many important respects Kuhn's position is closer to Wittgenstein's than to Gadamer's. Rather than following Gadamer's claim that understanding is always an interpretation, that interpretation grounds meaning, understanding and reason, Kuhn agrees with Wittgenstein's claim that what grounds meaning and understanding are conventional practices connected by family resemblances, like a collection of games. These conventions are not rules or interpretations but ways of seeing. Like Wittgenstein, he argues that it does not follow from the fact that paradigms lack explicit rules that they therefore lack rational foundations; irrationality does not follow from diversity of use and non-uniform connectedness.

These neglected Wittgensteinian aspects of Kuhn's argument come into clear view on comparison of the two philosophers. What the comparison reveals is not a "groping quality" but an authentic and sophisticated application of the grammar of Wittgenstein's later philosophy in the practices of the natural sciences. Kuhn uses the language-games analogy to challenge the view that there is some comprehensive or essential aspect of science that explains its rationality, that explains understanding and the growth of knowledge in the natural sciences. Against this popular view, Kuhn argues that science is a succession of conventional practices punctuated by non-cumulative breaks.

Finally, the claim that Kuhn presents an image of science as a conservative tradition-bound activity is simply mistaken. The games of science, like other human language-ga...es, are not just conventional but also dynamic. The natural scientist sometimes 'obeys the rule' but also sometimes 'goes against it': applying scientific concepts as a result of being trained into customary

scientific practices, but also challenging, amending and abandoning those customs in favour of competitors, using deliberative processes and techniques of persuasion. This interplay between convention and revolution is at the heart of Wittgenstein argument about language-games and is what Kuhn calls the 'essential tension': the creative ability to "live in a world out of joint."[164]

For the philosopher of science understanding the variety of scientific traditions is arrived at by a perspicuous representation of this variety, by surveying or seeing the connections among the irreducible plurality of rule-governed scientific conventions, seeing the family resemblances among a variety of different scientific practices, without the assistance of a general rule.

---

164 *Structure* 79.

CHAPTER VI

Socrates, or the *Phronimoi?*
Reflections on a Comparative-Dialogical Political Philosophy

One of the ways we can understand this Wittgensteinian approach I have been surveying is to compare it to one with which it conflicts. A model of understanding that searches for what is definitive at the expense of the *activity* of understanding is close to the Socratic approach.[1] In fact, in *The Duty of Genius* Ray Monk writes that "Wittgenstein once said that his method could be summed up by saying that it was the exact opposite of that of Socrates...."[2] In the first volume to their magisterial analytical commentary to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Baker and Hacker concur. They write: "Wittgenstein thought that 'Plato's method' was influential and deeply misconceived" and "[he] exposes its misconception of understanding, explanation, and the normativity of rules."[3]

Let's consider as an example of Socrates' approach, the *Meno*. In this dialogue, Meno asks Socrates "whether virtue is acquired by teaching or by practice" or if neither, then whether it comes by "nature" or some other way. Claiming not to know the answer, Socrates turns the question on Meno who gives the meaning of virtue by citing the different and various examples of virtues that he is familiar with. To this Socrates replies, "how fortunate I am, Meno! I ask you for one virtue, you present me with a swarm of them...."[4] Socrates insists on the quality in which the virtues "are all alike." He states: "however many and different they may be, they all have a common nature which makes them virtues."[5] Socrates is concerned that "ever and anon we are landed in

---

1 I would like to thank Dr. Ray Monk for his comments in the preparation of this section of the dissertation.

2 Monk, *Duty of Genius* 337-38.

3 Baker and Hacker, *Analytical Commentary Volume 1*, 669.

4 *Meno*, 72a.

5 Ibid., 72a-72b.

particulars, but this is not what I want."[6] What he wants, what Socrates is looking for is "the *simile in multis*",[7] and "what virtue is in the universal" and not an explanation that makes "a singular into a plural...not broken into a number of pieces...."[8]

In this Platonic dialogue Socrates looks for the meaning of a word by looking for a definition that states the necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the word in every case. As Baker and Hacker note, Socrates' method "was to take inability to define a word as proof of failure to understand it."[9] Socrates' interlocutor on asked for a definition often replies by giving examples, whereupon Socrates responds that examples will not do, that he wants to know the essence of the phenomenon is question. The inability to offer a definition is taken to be "a scandalous demonstration of ignorance"[10] and an object of ridicule. Wittgenstein does just the opposite of Socrates. In fact his references to *Theaetetus* in the *Blue Book* are meant to be examples of precisely the kind of philosophical approach that he is reacting against. Wittgenstein observes: "When Socrates asks the question, 'what is knowledge?' he does not even regard it as a preliminary answer to enumerate cases of knowledge."[11] Wittgenstein explains that the example reveals a typical philosophical puzzlement - the question seems to demand a definition, an answer in the form of strict rules. The puzzle appears to be the result of the absence of rules or a definition and this lacuna creates mental discomfort. Considering Socrates' question in the *Theaetetus*, "What is

---

6 Ibid., 74b-75a.

7 Ibid., 75a.

8 Ibid., 77b. Wittgenstein cites as an example *Theaetetus* in which Socrates asks the question "what is knowledge?" Wittgenstein refers to the *Theaetetus* in *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, sections 46 and 518 and to section 146d-7c of *Theaetetus* in *The Blue Book* 20, 26-27.

9 Baker and Hacker, *Analytical Commentary Volume 1*, 668.

10 Ibid.

11 *The Blue Book* 20.

Knowledge", Wittgenstein writes,

> ... here the case is even clearer, as the discussion begins with the pupil giving an example of an exact definition, and then analogous to this definition of the word "knowledge" is asked for. As the problem is put, it seems that there is something wrong with the ordinary use of the word "knowledge". It appears we don't know what it means, and that therefore, perhaps, we have no right to use it. We should reply: "There is no one exact usage of the word 'knowledge'; but we can make up several such usages, which will more or less agree with the ways the word is actually used". The man who is philosophically puzzled sees a law in the way a word is used, and, trying to apply this law consistently, comes up against cases where it leads to paradoxical results....[12]

Unlike Socrates, Wittgenstein looks at how the word is used in different cases and examples, and says that to grasp a concept is to 'see the connections' among the various examples of it. As in the example of 'games' in the *Philosophical Investigations* section 66, this does not take the form of seeing what the examples all have in common, but seeing their family resemblances, their "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing...." This process of 'seeing connections' is described in dialogical terms by Wittgenstein - as a conversation of exchange - as expressed in the following passages of the *Investigations*:

> 209.   "But then doesn't our understanding reach beyond all the examples?"—A very queer expression, and a quite natural one!—But is that *all*? Isn't there a deeper explanation; or mustn't at least the *understanding* of the explanation be deeper?—Well, have I myself a deeper understanding? Have I *got* more than I give in the explanation?—But then, whence the feeling that I have got more? Is it like the case where I interpret what is not limited as a length that reaches beyond every length?

> 210.   "But do you really explain to the other person what you yourself understand? Don't you get him to guess the essential thing? You give

---

12 Ibid., 26-27.

him examples,—but he has to guess their drift, to guess your intention."—every explanation which I can give myself I give to him too.—"He guesses what I intend" would mean: various interpretations of my explanation come to his mind, and he lights on one of them. So in this case he could ask; and I could and should answer him.

Wittgenstein's point here to his imaginary interlocutor and his comments about Socrates in the *Blue Book* is that it is wrong not only in looking for an essential definition or rule but also in looking for any kind of rule or definition at all - even ı definition that listed all the family resemblances of games for example would not help.

> 71.   One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way.—I do not, however, mean by this that he is supposed to see in those examples that common thing which I—for some reason—was unable to express. Here giving examples is not an indirect means of explaining—in default of a better. For any general definition can be misunderstood too....[13]

The point is that understanding the meaning of a word is not having any kind of rule or definition but rather acquiring a practical ability to use the word in different circumstances and being able to explain when questioned why you use it this way and that, being able to find differences and similarities in other examples.

> 77.   If someone were to draw a sharp boundary I could not acknowledge it as the one that I too always wanted to draw, or had drawn in my mind. For I did not always want to draw one at all. His concept can then be said to be not the same as mine, but akin to it. This kinship is that of two pictures, one of which consists of colour patches with vague contours, and the other of patches similarly shaped and distributed, but with clear contours. The kinship is just as undeniable as the difference.[14]

---

13 *Philosophical Investigations* Part I, section 71.

14 Ibid., Part I, section 76.

When he suggests that a person who cannot define a word does not know what he is talking about in using it, Socrates is discrediting and misrepresenting the customary, conventional, practical nature of understanding. The fallacy of Socrates' reasoning is exposed by the fact to understand a word is not to give a definition of it. Someone's use of a concept may manifest his understanding it independently of whether he defines it. Moreover, as Baker and Hacker suggest, "his failing to give a preferred form of explanation of it on request does not defeat such an attribution of understanding to him."[15]

It follows from this, Wittgenstein argues, that you can only understand the meaning of a word by becoming a participant in the games in which it is used with others: that is, by entering into dialogue. For it is only by the practice of dialogue that you acquire the ability to use the term in question. So, meaning is dialogical in the sense that there is no rule that uniquely describes how a word is used (because use is not circumscribed by rules) so no attempt to explicate and idealize the rules will ever lead to understanding - only the practice of dialogue does that.

This is not to say that Socrates' approach was not organized around a fundamental insight. Wittgenstein agrees with the view that understanding presupposes the ability to justify and critically contest the use of a word and that an explanation provides a standard of correctness for this use.[16] In this sense, Wittgenstein and Socrates agree that dialogue is central to human understanding. But Socrates did not see how justification and critical contestation are dialogical. For Socrates, dialogue is merely instrumental to

---

15 Baker and Hacker, *Analytical Commentary Volume 1*, 668.
16 Ibid., 670.

getting the right definition, to finding the essential aspects of the boundary, where for Wittgenstein it is constitutive: that is, we only acquire the abilities to explain, understand and critically contest concepts by participating in various struggles with others over their meaning.[17]

Socrates ridiculed his interlocutors for not getting the right definition of justice, but he failed to recognize that they nevertheless knew what justice was, not because they possessed the precise meaning or a common element in all its applications, but because they understood the usage of the term. What Socrates failed to see is what Aristotle did not: that our social and political vocabulary is 'practical' and conventional, not natural or general; it is rooted in customary practice and use, not in consensus and universal agreement; it is not enough to have a 'theory' of justice, but as Aristotle writes, "we must endeavour to possess and use it...."[18]

In the *Apology* this is perhaps what Meletus is trying to say in his reply to

---

17 As Taylor has argued these struggles for meaning are ongoing. "If the best can never be definitely guaranteed, then nor are decline and triviality inevitable. The nature of a free society is that it will always be the locus of a struggle between higher and lower forms of freedom. Neither side can abolish the other, but the line can be moved, never definitively but at least for some people for some time, one way or the other. Through social action, political change, and winning hearts and minds, the better forms can gain ground, at least for a while. In a sense, a genuinely free society can take as its elf-description the slogan put forward in quite another sense by revolutionary movements like the Italian Red Brigades: "la lotta continua," the struggle goes on—in fact forever." Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity* 78.

18 Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* 1095a4-6, 1179a 35-b2. Aristotle writes: "... The causes or means that bring about any form of excellence are the same as those that destroy it, and similarly with art; for it is as a result of playing the harp that people become good and bad harpists. The same principle applies to builder and other craftsmen. Men will become good builders as a result of building well, and bad ones as a result of building badly. Otherwise there would be no need of anyone to teach them : they would all be born either good or bad. Now this holds good also of the virtues. It is the way that we behave in the face of danger, accustoming ourselves to be timid or confident, that makes us brave or cowardly....In a word, then, like activities produce like dispositions. Hence we must give our activities a certain quality, because it is their characteristics that determine the resulting dispositions. So it is a matter of no little importance what sort of habits we form from the earliest age - it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world." Ibid., 1103b1-25.

Socrates. When Socrates asks how young Athenians learn the virtues, Meletus replies that it is the laws, the jury, the audience, the members of Council and the assembly. Socrates asks: "All the Athenians, it seems, make the young into fine good men, and I alone corrupt them. Is that what you mean?" Meletus replies: "That is most definitely what I mean."[19] Socrates replies with disdain and scorn.There is no greater blessing to the city of Athens he claims than his service to the god[20] and it is to fulfil the role of gadfly, Socrates claims, that "the god has placed me in the city." He states: "I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company."[21] He is "a gift of the god to the city" and his task is "to persuade" Athenians to care for justice. But Socrates never actually fought for justice in the city whose unacceptable justice he presumes to understand, and he justifies his non-participation on the basis of a "divine sign from the god which Meletus has ridiculed in his deposition"[22] which, Socrates tells his accusers, "never encourages me to do anything. This is what has prevented me from taking part in public affairs...."[23] He tells the jury:

> no man will survive who...prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city. A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive even for a short time.[24]

It would be too easy to accept Socrates' view that the Athenians were simply 'striking out at' him because they were annoyed that he challenged their unfounded or ignorant beliefs "as people are when they are aroused from a

---

19 Plato, *Apology*, 24c-25b.
20 Ibid., 30a.
21 Ibid., 31a.
22 Ibid., 31d.
23 Ibid., 31d.
24 Ibid., 32a.

doze"[25]; or that Athens "was like a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish...and needed to be stirred up."[26] Once we ignore Socrates' haughty interpretation, (and taking into consideration that the sentence against Socrates might be objectionable by our standards of justice), Meletus' position is not as indefensible as Socrates implies. Athenians themselves do know what virtue is, Meletus would say, and they know how to teach the virtues to the young, because they are engaged in democratic dialogue with their fellow citizens every day judging and misjudging cases of justice and injustice, even if they cannot formulate a definition of justice, even if they cannot find the *simile in multis* that Socrates demands. So, Meletus is a democratic Wittgensteinian here, challenging Socrates' anti-democratic and self-righteous unitarianism, his disdain for democratic dialogue and the diverse practices of the Athenian citizen-participants.

What this comparative dialogical approach teaches is that we can learn what concepts like 'justice', 'liberty', 'science' or 'the self' mean not by taking Socrates' advice and leading exclusively private lives, and removing ourselves from the public debate but, like the citizen-participants who opposes Socrates' elitism, by engaging in democratic dialogue with our fellow citizens every day, by judging and misjudging cases of justice and injustice, by understanding and misunderstanding each other, by struggling to make sense of our world, by creating and questioning our institutions, and by arguing about the boundaries that we ourselves create and follow. Contrary to Socrates' prescription, people who "fight for justice" must also lead public lives even if we cannot formulate or cannot be ruled by universal principles of justice or general definitions of science, or comprehensive theories of freedom, or even come close to reaching an agreement or consensus.

---

25 Ibid., 31a.
26 Ibid., 30e.

CONCLUSION

It is time now to review the preceding discussion and consider the shape of the landscape this study has produced: the streets and squares that were visited and what parts of the city beckon us to visit next. In these brief concluding remarks I want to review what Thomas Kuhn, Quentin Skinner and Charles Taylor have taught us about Wittgenstein and social and political philosophy.

The aim of this dissertation has been to bring to light a different way of looking at Wittgenstein's implications for social and political philosophy by way of assembled reminders, a survey of various uses of Wittgenstein. I did not intend by the presentation of these examples that the reader is supposed to see in them a rule, something that is common to all such as an essential Wittgenstein or a deeper explanation that reaches beyond all the examples. Rather, my aim has been to show some family resemblances among Kuhn, Skinner, Taylor and Wittgenstein, how they are related to one another in many different ways and in some cases how they are not. My survey explored different occasions of use and identified overlapping similarities with aspects of Wittgenstein's ways of looking at things. And it is because of these relationships that I called the three examples 'comparative-dialogical' Wittgensteinians.

The issues tackled by this dissertation have been twofold: first I reviewed a current orthodox view of Ludwig Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian philosophy, then I set up 'objects of comparison' in order to challenge and correct this view. The orthodox view is that concerning Wittgenstein's later works, such as *The Blue and Brown Books*, the *Philosophical Investigations*, and *On*

Certainty, the social and political implications are relativist and conservative. That is, Wittgenstein's concepts such as 'forms of life', 'language-games' and 'rule-following' successfully challenge varieties of cultural and historical invariance and transcendental theories of reason and understanding but in so doing they slide into a kind of relativism by trapping reason and understanding in customary practice. In other words, accepting the Wittgensteinian position means defending and promoting a rule-determined and context-determined rationality.

The political implications of this relativism is an apology for the existing order: Wittgensteinians are condemned to live in accordance with their customs and traditions without ever being able to evaluate them or critically reflect on them. According to this relativist-conservative view, our customary practices or forms of life determine the boundaries of understanding and critical reflection. Because understanding is trapped in our practices, customary activities and forms of life, these are consequently, in Dunn's words, realities "beyond which no human appeal can be made". Thus, according to the commentators I reviewed, critically reflecting on or evaluating our practices and forms of life is next to impossible: they cannot be judged, criticized or compared. And so the implications of Wittgenstein's remarks for social and political values are clear: they promote a non-interfering, private or uncritical social and political philosophy. Philosophy leaves the world as it is and so the philosopher can only interpret the world in various ways but cannot change it.

In order to challenge and correct this commonplace understanding of Wittgenstein, I employed the technique of perspicuous representation, or the survey. That is, I challenged the prevailing and misleading sense of what can and cannot be said and done with Wittgenstein's concepts by surveying the

variety of things that have been said and done with them by Kuhn, Skinner and Taylor. The three alternatives in social and political philosophy to this relativist and conservative reading are three ways in which Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian philosophy has been used to critically reflect, assess, mediate, arbitrate, adjudicate and reconcile various ways of seeing things. My approach has therefore been to set up as 'objects of comparison' the different applications and uses of Wittgenstein by these authors. What these uses illustrate is that the relativist and politically conservative interpretations of Wittgenstein's late philosophy are based on a picture of understanding that Wittgenstein himself expressly rejected. Describing language-games, forms of life and our rule-following activities in rule-determined and context-determined ways are examples of what Wittgenstein calls 'our craving for generality', because they neglect or overlook the important ways in which our forms of life are indeterminate, flexible, bustling and flowing.

At the same time, part of my argument has been to take issue with what appears to be an alternative to the rule-determinist reading — Rorty's reading of Wittgenstein — a reading which I have claimed is actually a variation of context-determinism. Consequently I have argued that his view that philosophy can at best be therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systematic, that it can only "break the crust of convention" is equally mistaken. Once we abandon our craving for generality and its assumptions that our forms of life are reducible to a set of rules or to obeying the rules, the alternative is not the continuing conversation or edifying philosophy.

What the various commentaries have missed is the important point that Wittgenstein makes in *Philosophical Investigations* section I.201: "there is a way of grasping a rule...which is exhibited what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases." Many of the commentaries I reviewed focus

on either one or the other side of this conjunction: Winch and Kripke for example build their arguments around rule-obedience arguing that understanding is obeying the authority of rules or the community; Rorty builds his philosophical claims on an anti-foundationalist rule-disobedience - "breaking the crust of convention". But as this passage of section I. 201 suggests, both aspects of understanding are equally important to Wittgenstein: our forms of life are like a collection of games in which we obey certain rules, but also in which we question those rules and make up the rules of the game as we go along. Our understanding is shaped by customary and conventional boundaries, which we also challenge and call into question. We draw boundaries, but not ones that are fixed and unchanging. Our indefinite boundaries are boundaries nevertheless.

The comparative and dialogical Wittgensteinians teach us that abandoning the craving for generality and adopting the attitude of perspicuous representation allows us to survey the various examples available to us, to understand practices very different from our own, how different ways of seeing things are rule-governed. They also teach us that we can assess or critically evaluate various forms of life by comparing how they are related to one another in many different multifarious ways, by examining, as Wittgenstein puts it in *Philosophical Investigations* section I.66, the "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."

Furthermore, the examples show us that some ways of seeing things can be ranked and compared not to an unframed background but to each other, to other views, in terms of the way they allow us to understand aspects of our forms of life and according to the social and political purposes for which the boundaries are drawn in the first place. I called this a 'comparative-dialogical'

Wittgensteinianism to identify how language is used not in purely descriptive but practical and analogical terms, as a tool of comparative persuasion towards critically reflecting on, assessing or evaluating competing ways of seeing things. The examples show that if there are positive social and political implications of Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian philosophy, these stem from the insight that comparative dialogue plays a key role in the struggles to establish and to challenge boundaries and in the difficult tasks of mediating, arbitrating, adjudicating or reconciling differences. The examples teach us that the polemical relationship, the struggle, (what Kuhn calls the 'essential tension') between change and persistence, convention and innovation, 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it in actual cases' is a critically important aspect of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

The promise of this comparative-dialogical way of seeing things is also an an escape from the terms of another collection of contemporary debates around the impasse between modernism and post-modernism. In contrast to the limited alternatives of either 'unity' (rule-obedience) or 'difference' (rule-disobedience) and the enfeebled and limited role of dialogue (that is to either seek consensus or break it), Wittgenstein suggests a rich comparative approach where language is a multiplicity of tools for building many possible foundations and boundaries of understanding, as well as breaking these foundations and boundaries in actual cases. On the comparative-dialogical Wittgensteinian account, the aim of dialogue does not have to be about reaching a consensus or about reconciling conflicting claims to the truth by seeking unity but rather is a collection of tools that can be used to find overlapping similarities and family resemblances as well as differences. Recognizing that even 'dialogue' itself is a variety allows us to resist the instrumental imperative to search for the *simile in multis*, without having to accept that we live in a wholly contingent or Darwinian universe or that we

can never understand our eclectic, variegated and multifarious forms of life.

What the comparative-dialogical Wittgensteinians teach us is that understanding and critical reflection are embedded in customary practices and rule-governed conventions, not a dramatic narrative, truth-conditional theory or any other common, culturally-invariant or comprehensive boundary or system of understanding that could unite the various conflicting, rival or uncombinable conventions, practices and forms of life. At the same time they also show that philosophy can be more than edifying: philosophy can build boundaries as well as help us see things differently and can help us see why mediation, arbitration or reconciliation are not always impossible or undesirable goals. Finally, they teach us that philosophical reflection does not have to leave the world as it is. Philosophy can help us understand the world, but can also be used to change it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I.   **Ludwig Wittgenstein**

McGuiness, Brian and G.H. von Wright, eds.*Ludwig Wittgenstein, Cambridge Letters: Correspondence with Russel, Keynes, Moore, Ramsey and Sraffa.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value.* Trans. Peter Winch. Ed. G.H. Von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *On Certainty.* Trans. Dennis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. Ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. Von Wright. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations" Generally known as The Blue and Brown Books.* New York: Harper and Row, 1958.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations.* Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations Reissued German-English Edition.*Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.* Trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuiness. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1994.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough.* Ed. Rush Rhees England: Brynmill, 1979.

II.   **Thomas L. Kuhn - Books**

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977.

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions Second Edition, Enlarged.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970.

III. Thomas L. Kuhn - Articles

Kuhn, Thomas S. "The Natural and the Human Sciences." Hiley, Bohman and Shusterman 17-24.

Kuhn, Thomas S. "Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research?" Lakatos and Musgrave 1-23.

Kuhn, Thomas S. "Reflections on My Critics." Lakatos and Musgrave 231-278.

Kuhn, Thomas. "Theory Change as Structure Charge: Comments on the Sneed Formalism." *Erkenntnis* 10 (1976): 190-91.

IV. Quentin Skinner - Books

Skinner, Quentin. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought Volume One: The Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Skinner, Quentin. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought Volume Two: The Age of Reformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Skinner, Quentin. *Machiavelli*. Oxford Past Masters. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Skinner, Quentin. *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

V. Quentin Skinner - Articles

Skinner, Quentin. "A Reply to My Critics." Tully, *Meaning and Context* 231-288.

Skinner, Quentin "Introduction: The Return of Grand Theory." *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*. Ed. Quentin Skinner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 1-20.

Skinner, Quentin. "Language and Social Change." Tully, *Meaning and Context* 119-132.

Skinner, Quentin. "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas." Tully, *Meaning and Context* 29-67.

Skinner, Quentin. "Motives Intentions and the Interpretations of Texts." Tully, *Meaning and Context* 68-78.

Skinner, Quentin. " 'Social Meaning' and The Explanation of Social Action." Tully, *Meaning and Context* 79-96.

Skinner, Quentin. "Some Problems in the analysis of Political Thought and Action." Tully, *Meaning and Context* 97-118.

Skinner, Quentin. "The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives." Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, *Philosophy in History* 193-221.

VI. Charles Taylor - Books

Taylor, Charles.*The Explanation of Behaviour*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964.

Taylor, Charles. *Human Agency and Language Philosophical Papers 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Taylor, Charles. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Concord: Anansi, 1991.

Taylor, Charles. *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Taylor, Charles. *Philosophy and the Human Sciences Philosophical Papers 2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Taylor, Charles. *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*. Ed. Guy Laforest. Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.

VII.   Charles Taylor - Articles

Taylor, Charles. "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate."*Liberalism and the Moral Life*. Ed. Nancy Rosemblum. Cambridge, Mass. and London: England Harvard University Press, 1989. 159-182.

Taylor, Charles. "The Dialogical Self." Hiley, Bohman and Shusterman 304-314.

Taylor, Charles. "Explanation and Practical Reason." *Wider Working Papers*. Finland: World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University, August, 1989.

Taylor, Charles. "Invoking Civil Society" Ed. Greg Urban and Benjamin Lee *Working Papers and Proceedings of the Center for Psychosocial Studies* 31. (Chicago, 1990).

Taylor, Charles. "Leading a Life." *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*. Ed. Ruth Chang. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1997. 170-183.

Taylor, Charles. "Overcoming Epistemology." Baynes, Bohman and McCarthy 464-488.

Taylor, Charles. "Philosophy and Its History." Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, *Philosophy in History* 17-30.

Taylor, Charles. "The Philosophy of the Social Sciences." *Political Theory and Political Education*. Ed. Melvin Richter. Princeton: Princeton Universtity Press, 1980. 76-93.

Taylor, Charles. "Political Theory as Practice." *Social Theory and Political Practice: Wolfson College Lectures 1981*. Ed. Christopher Lloyd. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983. 91-115.

Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition." *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Ed. Amy Gutman. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994. 25-73.

Taylor, Charles. "Rationality." *Rationality and Relativism*. Ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982. 87-105.

Taylor, Charles. "Reply and Re-articulation: Charles Taylor Replies." Tully, *Philosophy in An Age of Pluralism* 213-257.

Taylor, Charles. "Shared and Divergent Values." *Options for a New Canada.* Ed. Ronald L. Watts and Douglas M. Brown. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1991. 53-76.

Taylor, Charles. "To Follow a Rule." *Rules and Conventions: Literature, Philosophy, Social Theory.* Ed. Mette Hjort. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992. 167-185.

Taylor, Charles. "Understanding and Explanation in the *Geisteswissenschaften.*" *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule.* Ed. Steven Holtzmann and Christopher Leich. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981. 191-210.

VIII. Commentaries on Wittgenstein and Other Related Works

Ackerman, Felicia. "Does Philosophy Only State What Everyone Admits? A Discussion of the Method of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations." French, Uehling, Jr., and Wettstein 246-254.

Aristotle. *The Nichomachean Ethics.* Trans. J.A.K. Thomson. London: Penguin Books, 1988.

Austin, J.L. "Performative-Constative." Searle,*The Philosophy of Language* 13-22.

Baker, G.P. and P.M.S. Hacker. *Wittgenstein Understanding and Meaning: An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations,Volume 1.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.

Baker, G.P. and P.M.S. Hacker. *Wittgenstein Rules, Grammar and Necessity: An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations,Volume 2.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.

Baker, G.P. and P.M.S. Hacker. *Wittgenstein Meaning and Mind Part I Essays: An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations,Volume 3.* Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.

Baker, G.P. and P.M.S. Hacker. *Wittgenstein Meaning and Mind Part II Exegesis §§ 243-427: An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations,* Volume 3. Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.

Baker, G.P. and P.M.S. Hacker.*Wittgenstein Mind and Will: An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations,Volume* 4. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996.

Baker, G.P. and P.M.S. Hacker. *Scepticism, Rules and Language.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.

Baker, Gordon. "*Philc* :*ophical Investigations* Section 122: Neglected Aspects."*Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations.* Ed. Robert L. Arrington and Hans-Johan Glock. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. 35-68.

Barnes, Barry. *Interests and the Growth of Knowledge.* London Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977.

Baynes, Keneth, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy. *After Philosophy: End or Transformation.* Massachusetts and London: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1987.

Baynes, Keneth, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy. "Charles Taylor." Baynes, Bohman and McCarthy, *After Philosophy* 459-463.

Bernstein, Richard J. *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976.

Bernstein, Richard J. *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis.* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

Bernstein, Richard J. *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986.

Bloor, David. *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Bloor, David. "Wittgenstein and Mannheim on the Sociology of Mathematics." *Sociology of Scientific Knowledge: A Source Book.* Ed. H.M. Collins. Bath, Avon: Bath University Press, 1982. 39-57.

Bouveresse, J. " 'The Darkness of This Time': Wittgenstein and the Modern World." Griffiths 11-39.

Cavell, Stanley. "Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein's *Investigations.*" Sluga and Stern, *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* 261-295.

Cavell, Stanley. "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy." Shanker, *Volume Two* 36-57.

Cedarbaum, Daniel G. "Paradigms." *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 14. 3 (1983): 173-213.

Collins, Arthur. "On the Paradox Kripke Finds in Wittgenstein." French, Uehling Jr., and Wettstein 74-88.

Dallmayr, Fred. R. And Thomas A. McCarthy, ed. *Understanding and Social Inquiry.* Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977.

Davidson, Donald. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

Davidson, Donald. "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." *Truth and Interpretations: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson.* Ed. Ernest LePore. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986. 434-446.

Danford, John. *Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Dunn, John. "The Future of Political Philosophy in The West." *Rethinking Modern political Theory.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 171-189.

Descartes, René. *Meditations of First Philosophy.* Trans. Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing Co., 1980.

French, Peter A. Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, eds. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XVII: The Wittgenstein Legacy.* Notre Dame, Indiana: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method.* New York: Crossroad, 1985.

Gellner, Ernest. "Concepts and Society." Wilson 18-49.

Gellner, Ernest. *Words and Things*. London: Gollancz, 1959.

Grayling, A.C. *Wittgenstein*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Griffiths, A. Phillips, ed.*Wittgenstein Centenary Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Gutting, Gary, ed. *Paradigms and Revolutions*. Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980.

Hacker, P.M.S. *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytical Philosophy*. Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

Hacking, Ian, ed. *Scientific Revolutions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Harré, Rom. *Problems of Scientific Revolution: Progress and Obstacles to Progress in the Sciences: The Herbert Spencer Lectures 1973*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

Heaton, John and Judy Groves. *Wittgenstein for Beginners*. Cambridge: Icon Books, 1994.

Hesse, Mary. *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosphy of Science*. Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980.

Hiley, David R. "The Deep Challenge of Pyrrhonian Scepticism." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, 2, (April 1987): 185-214.

Hiley, David R, James F. Bohman and Richard Shusterman, eds. *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Hilmy, S. Stephen. *The Later Wittgenstein,The Emergence of a New Philosophical Method*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

Holmes, Stephen. "The Permanent Structure of Antiliberal Thought." Rosenblum 227-253.

Hughes, John. *The Philosophy of Social Research*. London and New York: Longman, 1980.

Janik, Allan. "Nyíri on the Conservatism of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy." Janik, *Style, Politics and the Future of Philosophy* 40-58

Janik, Allan. *Style, Politics and the Future of Philosophy.* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989.

Janik, Allan. "Towards a Wittgensteinian Metaphysics of the Political." Janik, *Style, Politics and the Future of Philosophy* 93-108.

Janik, Allan. "Afterword With Acknowledgements." Janik, *Style, Politics and the Future of Philosophy* 264-267.

Kripke, Saul. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Lakatos, Imre and Alan Musgrave, eds. *Criticism and The Growth of Knowledge.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

Lear, Jonathan. "Leaving the World Alone." *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXIX, 7, (July 1982): 382-403.

Letson, Ben H. *Davidson's Theory of Truth and Its Implications for Rorty's Pragmatism.* American University Stuies Series V, Philosophy, Vol. 178, New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1997.

Lock, Grahame. "Conservatism and Radicalism in Social Theory and Philosophical Method." Weinberger, Koller and Schramm 271-278.

Lugg, A. "Wittgenstein, Science and the Authority of The Community." Weinberger, Koller and Schramm 376-378.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Second Edition.* Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" *The Philosophy of Social Explanation.* Ed. Alan Ryan. London: Oxford University Press, 1973. 171-188.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science." Gutting 54-74.

Malcolm, Norman. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir.* London: Oxford University Press, 1958.

McGuinn, Marie. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations.* London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

McGuinness, Brian, ed. *Wittgenstein and His Times.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd., 1982.

Monk, Ray. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius.* London: Vintage, 1990.

Mouffe, Chantal, ed. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism.* London and New York, Routledge, 1996.

Mulhall, Stephen and Adam Swift. *Liberals and Communitarians.* Oxford and Cambridge Mass.: Blackwell, 1992.

Musgrave, Alan E. "Kuhn's Second Thoughts." Gutting 39-53.

Niles, Ian. "Wittgenstein and Infinite Linguistic Competence." French, Uehling, Jr., and Wettstein 193-213.

Nyíri, J.C. "Wittgenstein's Later Work in relation to Conservatism." McGuinness 44-68.

Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. *Witgenstein and Justice.* 1972. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993.

Plato. *Meno.* Trans. Benjamin Jowett. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1949.

Plato. *The Trial and Death of Socrates.* Trans. G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Inc., 1987.

Popkin, Richard H. *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979.

Quinton, Anthony, ed. *Political Philosophy.* London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Rorty Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Rorty, Richard. "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism." *Deconstruction and Pragmatism.* Ed. Chantal Mouffe. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. 13-18.

Rorty, Richard, J.B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner, eds. *Philosophy in History.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Rosenblum, Nancy L., ed. *Liberalism and the Moral Life.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Rosenblum, Nancy L. "Pluralism and Self-Defence." Rosenblum, *Liberalism and the Moral Life* 207-226.

Scheman, Naomi. "Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground." Sluga and Stern 383-410.

Schulte, Joachim. "Wittgenstein and Conservatism." Shanker, *Volume Four* 60-69.

Searle, J.R., ed. *The Philosophy of Language.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Searle, J.R. "What is a Speech Act?" Searle, *The Philosophy of Language* 39-53.

Shanker, Stuart, ed. *Ludwig Wittgenstein Critical Assessments, Volume Four, From Theology to Sociology: Wittgenstein's Impact on Contemporary Thought* London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

Shanker, Stuart, ed. *Ludwig Wittgenstein Critical Assessments, Volume Two, From Philosophical Investigations to On Certainty: Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy.* London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

Shapere, Dudley. "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions." Gutting 27-38.

Sluga, Hans and David G. Stern, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Stern, David G. *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Stern, David. G. "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Philosophy." Sluga and Stern, *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* 442-476.

Stroud, Barry. "Mind, Meaning and Practice." Sluga and Stern, *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* 296-319.

Teghrarian, Souren. "Rule-Scepticism and Wittgenstein's Theory of Meaning." Weinberger, Koller and Schramm 342-345.

Trigg, Roger. "Wittgenstein and Social Science." Griffiths 209-222.

Tully, James, ed.*Philosophy in An Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Tully, James, ed. *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Tully, James. "The Pen is a Mighty Sword: Quentin Skinner's Analysis of Politics." Tully, *Meaning and Context* 3-25.

Tully, James. *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in An Age of Diversity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Tully, James. *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Tully, James. "The Common House of Europe: An Appreciation of the Sources of the Self." Unpublished Essay, 1989.

Tully, James. "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy: Understanding Practices of Critical Reflection." *Political Theory* 17 No. 2 (May 1989): 172-204.

Tully, James. "Citizenship, Democracy and Diversity: Rethinking Identity Politics and Struggles for Recognition." The Hannah Arendt Lecture. University of Southampton. June 9, 1998.

Tully James. "Locke on Liberty." *Conceptions of Liberty in Political Philosophy.* Ed. Z. Pelczynski and J. Gray. London: Athlone, 1984. 57-82.

Weinberger, Ota, Peter Koller and Alfred Schramm, eds. *Philosophy of Law, Politics and Society: Proceedings of the 12th International Wittgenstein Symposium.* Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1988.

Wilson, Bryan R., ed. *Rationality.* New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

Winch, Peter. "Authority." Quinton 83-111.

Winch, Peter. "Certainty and Authority." Griffiths 223-237.

Winch, Peter. *The Idea of A Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958.

Winch, Peter. "Understanding a Primitive Society." Wilson 78-111.

Winch, Peter. "Persuasion." French, Uehling, Jr., and Wettstein 123-137.

Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy.* London: Fontana, 1985.