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Back to the Roots – Conservatism Revindicated

Wittgenstein and Heidegger

The paper in which I first gave expression to what might be taken as my conservative world-view began with a quote from Wittgenstein: “Men have judged that a king can make rain; we say this contradicts all experience. Today they judge that aeroplanes and the radio etc. are means for the closer contact of people and the spread of culture.” Two passages by Heidegger, written in the 1930s, form an interesting parallel: “These days, airplanes and radios belong among the things that are closest to us”, and: there occurs “the annihilation of great distances by the airplane, in the setting before us of foreign and remote worlds in their everydayness, which is produced at random through radio by a flick of the hand”. Heidegger was definitely not fond of travelling to remote worlds. Where he felt safe – indeed philosophically safe – was in his hut up the mountains in the Black Forests, and in the pub not far from that hut, in the company of village peasants, smoking his pipe in silence. As he put it: “my whole work is sustained and guided by the world of these mountains and their people. Lately from time to time my work up there is interrupted for long stretches by conferences, lecture trips, committee meetings and my teaching work”. The world of conferences and lecture trips was one Heidegger detested. Compare a famous passage by him: “The scholar disappears and is replaced by the researcher engaged in research programs. These, and not the cultivation of scholarship, are what places his work at the cutting edge. The researcher no longer needs a library at home. He is, moreover, constantly on the move. He negotiates at conferences and collects information at congresses. He commits himself to publishers’ commissions. It is publishers who now determine which books need to be written.” I will come back to this passage towards the end of the present essay.

Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger were conservative thinkers, holding conservative views of man and history. In Heidegger's case this has of course never been in doubt. And for half a century now I have been arguing that Wittgenstein, too, was a conservative, indeed a rather old-fashioned conservative. My arguments have been generally rejected, but I am sick and tired of repeating the obvious over and over again. Let me here just quote one surely remarkable passage, written by Wittgenstein in 1948: "I think the way people are educated nowadays tends to diminish their capacity for suffering. At present a school is reckoned good if the children have a good time. And that used *not* to be the criterion. Parents moreover want their children to grow up like themselves (only more so), but nevertheless subject them to an education *quite* different from their own. – Endurance of suffering isn't rated highly because there is supposed not to be any suffering – really it's out of date."

Where Wittgenstein Failed

Wittgenstein's theorizing about human nature and cognition has a definite historical context: the Austrian and German neo-conservative movement of the 1920s and 30s, emerging in the aftermath of the Great War. Think of Spengler, think of the German Dostoevsky cult. The neo-conservatives faced a dilemma. While on the one hand they maintained that what holds together society cannot be but common traditions and ideals, on the other hand they had to realize that such traditions and ideals have been, by their time, irretrievably lost. Both Heidegger and Wittgenstein escaped this dilemma by transforming it into a purely philosophical one. The philosophy Heidegger developed became, by the late 1930s, a rather impenetrable kind of new metaphysics. In Wittgenstein's case the development was towards a philosophy of common-sense realism. His famous, far-reaching insight: the meaning of a word is not some abstract idea, but the way we *use* that word. Now using is *doing*: what society is held together by is "not an agreement in *opinions*", agreements in beliefs, but agreements, regularities in the "common behaviour of mankind". As Witt-

Wittgenstein then in his last years added: one must “recognize certain authorities in order to make judgements at all”, and: one cannot even err – that is, one loses altogether the capacity for rational thought – if one does not “judge in conformity” with some group or other.

During a lecture series he gave in 1939, Wittgenstein made an intriguing remark: “The important point is to see that the meaning of a word can be represented in two different ways: (1) by an image or picture, or something which corresponds to the word, (2) by the use of the word – which also comes to the use of the picture.” It is not entirely clear whether Wittgenstein here refers to pictures in the sense of metaphors, or to visual images, but certainly the latter constituted a crucial topic both in his early and later philosophy. The so-called *Brown Book* – a dictation to his Cambridge students in which he felt he made such a progress that he even began to translate it into German, in 1936, in a hut in Norway he had built for himself – has some pages showing, and discussing, schematic drawings of human faces, of specific facial expressions, say of a friendly mouth. Visual images some years later become a central topic in the manuscript which the editors decided to publish as “Part II” of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Images, Wittgenstein here strives to say, can express meanings words cannot; images can function as *natural signs*. In a manuscript entry written in 1946 Wittgenstein hypothesizes about some possible ways a tribe imagined by him might think: “To this people certain gestures, certain images, & so also certain words, are natural. And some of this is tradition, some are / original / reactions which were not (or at least not directly) given rise to / caused / by the influencing of the child on the part of the adults.” What Wittgenstein here does not, and nowhere does, explain: what is the basis of our spontaneous reactions to certain fundamental primitive visual patterns, say a friendly smile, say a newborn baby’s reaction to its mother’s smile? Wittgenstein’s theory of the visual, and in a broader sense his conservatism, is in need of completion. Strangely, it can be completed by joining it with the work of another member of the Austro-German neo-conservative movement of the 1920s and 30s, a work in itself very much incomplete, too: the work of the psychiatrist C. G. Jung.

Primordial Images

In his famous essay “The Psychology of the Unconscious Processes”, published in English in 1917, Jung wrote: “In every individual, in addition to the personal memories, there are also ... the great ‘primordial images’, the inherited potentialities of human imagination. They have always been potentially latent in the structure of the brain.” These images, Jung goes on to write, constitute the content of a *collective unconscious*, they are “imprinted on the human brain for untold ages”, are “images formed in the brain”, and they encompass “the wisdom of the experience of untold ages, deposited in the course of time and lying potential in the human brain”. A basic primordial image is that of the *mother*, the mother archetype, the loving mother with her loving smile, but also the mother who destroys you, with the hatred in her eyes betraying her smile. In his later writings, Jung gradually deleted almost all references to the human brain, the collective unconscious became a mystical/metaphysical notion, with “primordial images” divested of any perceptual/visual dimensions. Wittgenstein failed to see mankind’s history as a hidden source behind individual mental images; Jung on the other hand eventually became blind to the fundamental visuality of the latter.

The Road Back

While Jung, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger all shared some kind of a conservative world-view, their conservatisms were of differing radicalness. Jung had an active yearning for long-bygone primordial ages; Wittgenstein spoke of the “darkness of this time” but believed that “the sickness of a time” cannot be cured by purposeful action; Heidegger warned that “[t]he flight into tradition, out of a combination of humility and presumption, achieves, in itself, nothing, is merely a closing the eyes and blindness towards the historical moment”. Now the historical moment today, with the pandemic clearly showing that the past century or so has led us into a blind alley, seems to me to call for a conservatism more radical than even Jung represented,

for a conservatism the politically so very misguided neo-conservative movement to which he belonged proved unable to formulate, although possessing an adequate slogan: that of a “conservative revolution”. It is this slogan we today have to give content to. The task is to go back to the juncture where the blind alley was chosen. The sickness of our time consists in over-industrialization, overpopulation, extreme globalization, health-care aiming at prolonging age beyond any humanly reasonable point, and last but not least: the rise of the mass university. It is the phenomenon of the mass university I indirectly alluded to in the first paragraph of the present essay, and it is with pointing to some sobering aspects of the mass university I will now conclude.

Well before the pandemic arrived, the crucial connection between professors and students that had characterized the classical research university has become illusory, and indeed phoney. Professors, and their assistants striving for tenure-track and eventually for a professorship of their own, as a rule regard teaching as an unpleasant burden. What they really concentrate on are other unpleasant burdens: those of fundraising; of compulsory publishing which increasingly involves impact-factor manipulation; and on the perhaps less unpleasant but mostly sterile practice of participating, say monthly or even weekly, in conferences. Conferences help in getting papers published, but it is a fact that most of those papers are never read by anyone. What the present system of mass conferences adds to is just mass tourism. The road back fundamentally involves a new localism, with the resurrection of research universities that have a brick-and-mortar basis even while exploiting all the wonderful potentials of on-line communication and the web. But those potentials, too, need to be critically examined. Wittgenstein and Heidegger were clearly pessimistic about the radio. We today need a measure of pessimism when it comes to the internet. That pessimism, I am afraid, is part of conservatism revindicated.