

ACTA PHILOSOPHICA FENNICA

Vol. 28, Nos. 1-3

ESSAYS ON WITTGENSTEIN
IN HONOUR OF
G. H. VON WRIGHT

PUBLISHED FOR
SOCIETAS PHILOSOPHICA FENNICA
BY
NORTH-HOLLAND PUBLISHING COMPANY

Wittgenstein's New Traditionalism*

I. C. NYIRI

Towards the end of his life Wittgenstein wrote: "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 peoples and the spread of culture."¹ This remark is a rather clear allusion to what Wittgenstein, in my opinion, always believed: that man's so-called historical progress, and especially the positive role reason is supposed to play in it, is an illusion. The same conviction is reflected by Wittgenstein's choice of the motto for his *Philosophical Investigations*, a quotation from Nestroy: "Überhaupt hat der Fortschritt das an sich, daß er viel größer ausschaut, als er wirklich ist." That this motto refers to the social-historical progress of mankind and not, say, to Wittgenstein's own progress in philosophy, becomes obvious when viewed together with the Foreword written to the *Philosophische Bemerkungen*, dated 6. 11. 1930, where Wittgenstein states that the spirit of his work is different from that of the mainstream of European and American civilization, since the latter is characterized, as the former is not, by the idea of a constant progress. Wittgenstein's attitude towards the liberal idea of progress is that of a conservative. This attitude is, actually, not conspicuous in the *Philosophische Bemerkungen*, to which the Foreword was written subsequently; but it was already there, I believe, at the time of the *Tractatus* and it becomes quite manifest in Wittgenstein's later writings. My purpose in the present paper is to suggest that Wittgenstein's so-called later philosophy is the embodiment of a conservative-traditionalist view of history, and, in particular, to show that this philosophy in fact provides a logical foundation for such a view.

There can be no doubt at all that the conservative-traditionalist sentiment really was a basic element in Wittgenstein's personality. True, many of his later friends in England were left-wing; and his plans, in the thirties, to settle down in the Soviet Union, might suggest commu-

nist sympathies. But Wittgenstein could have been attracted by the personal integrity of some Marxists without being in agreement with their political views; and even if he shared, as I believe he did, their contempt towards bourgeois society, the background of that contempt was, in Wittgenstein's case, not at all leftist. Indeed, when Wittgenstein said that our age was a dark one², the standard by which he thus judged was not the vision of some future, ideal community; his sympathies were with past, patriarchal, authoritarian societies; and if it was not just the Russia of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky that he wished to rediscover in the USSR, then what appealed to him must simply have been the puritanical and authoritarian character of the Soviet way of life.³ His friend during and after the first World War, Paul Engelmann speaks of his loyalty towards all legitimate, *genuine* authority, whether religious or social; an attitude so much his second nature that revolutionary convictions of whatever kind appeared to him throughout his life as simply *immoral*. Wittgenstein, who, as Engelmann writes, saw through and abhorred all *unjustified* conventions, became through this attitude "a figure utterly beyond the comprehension of the 'educated' of our day".⁴ And Fania Pascal, Wittgenstein's Russian teacher in Cambridge in the mid-thirties, writes that "at a time when intellectual Cambridge was turning Left he was still an old-time conservative of the late Austro-Hungarian Empire".⁵ As it faded away, pre-war Austria became for Wittgenstein a standard, in comparison with which the decades following the war represented a sunken, miserable age.⁶ One can, in Wittgenstein's case, very clearly observe the process, described by the sociologist Karl Mannheim, in the course of which conservatism becomes a theory – the process, in which "an die Stelle eines schlichten Lebens aus einem alten Lebenskeime ein Haben der alten Lebensform auf der Ebene der Reflexion, auf der 'Ebene der Erinnerung' tritt".⁷

The theoretical crystallization of Wittgenstein's intuitive and frustrated traditionalism seems definitely to have been furthered by the impact he received from Spengler's work *The Decline of the West*. In the years 1931–33 Spengler's name is mentioned more than once in Wittgenstein's writings⁸, and this seems to be the very period during which the essential elements of Wittgenstein's later philosophy first emerge. In the *Philosophische Grammatik* many important ideas of the *Philosophical Investigations* are anticipated; indeed, many of the remarks contained in the earlier work appear practically unaltered in the later one. On the other hand, the *Philosophische Grammatik* is

quite unlike the *Philosophische Bemerkungen*. The stylistic difference between the two works⁹ is really striking — and this difference reflects a profound philosophical re-orientation. It has been suggested that the cause of this re-orientation was that famous paper by Gödel, on formally undecidable propositions of *Principia Mathematica*, published in 1931.¹⁰ But it seems that Wittgenstein was not acquainted with that paper before 1935.¹¹ Spengler's influence, on the other hand, is quite obvious. What was significant for Wittgenstein in his philosophical re-orientation, was not only Spengler's general pessimism as regards the fate of Western culture and his description of the type of man characteristic of the present age¹², but also the idea that Western culture and its specific mode of thinking is just one among many, that the Western spirit is, since the beginning of "modern times", in a process of decay, and that it is *Russianism* that to-day represents "Spring" in contrast to the "Winter" of the "Faustian" (Western) nations and their culture which by now has degenerated into a "civilization". Wittgenstein, too, speaks, early in 1931, of our "half-rotten culture", and of Russia, where "passion" still promises something, against which our "idle talk" is powerless. These expressions occur in a conversation with Schlick.¹³ In a previous conversation Wittgenstein comes to discuss Schlick's views on ethics. Schlick wrote that there were, in theological ethics, two views as to the essence of the Good: according to the shallower interpretation the Good is good because God so wills it; according to the profounder interpretation God wills the Good because it is good. Wittgenstein disagrees with Schlick. He believes that the first interpretation is the more profound one: good is, what God commands.¹⁴ Values, customs, traditions cannot and should not be *explained*.¹⁵ Every explanation is, as it were, a judgement of reason — but reason itself, as Wittgenstein in his later philosophy sets out to prove, is, in the last analysis, grounded in traditions. It is in this sense that Wittgenstein will constantly emphasize that all explanation must be done away with and description alone must take its place; that what has to be accepted, the given — is not explanations, but *forms of life*.

The results of Wittgenstein's later philosophy can be summed up by saying that "freedom", if this should mean something different from being bound by genuine traditions, is simply incompatible with reason; and that "nonconformism" is an anthropological absurdity. Wittgenstein nowhere explicitly formulates these results. The principle he stated in his early work, according to which "whereof one can-

not speak, thereof one must be silent", is the one he now *practises*. His analyses deal with concrete, almost banal, phenomena of human behaviour, especially linguistic behaviour. The key concepts of modern European philosophy – concepts like freedom, individuality, autonomy – Wittgenstein does not use. Those concepts belong to a certain *picture* of man, they are bound up with certain *presuppositions* – and Wittgenstein wants to liberate both his readers and himself from that picture and from those presuppositions entirely. Alice Ambrose describes the lectures Wittgenstein held in 1932–33. "He used the language of everyday speech – she reports – And there was no hint of mysticism, no reference to the unsayable. What was puzzling was his use of picturesque examples, which in themselves were easily comprehensible, but of which the *point* they were intended to make escaped one. It was like hearing a parable without being able to draw the moral."¹⁶

Now one such parable, often told by Wittgenstein, runs as follows. I give someone the order [to fetch me a red flower from the nearby meadow. How is he to know what sort of flower to bring, when I have only given him a *word*? How will he get from the colourless word – to a red flower? Well, one is inclined to say that he carries a red image in his mind as he sets out to look for a red flower, and he compares it with the flowers to see which of them has the colour of the image. Now Wittgenstein finds many faults with this answer. He suggests, first of all, that one should try to describe the procedure without recurring to the vague concept of a red mental image – since what a mental image achieves, can obviously be accomplished just as well with the help of, say, a red bit of paper. The following will then take place: our man carries a chart with him on which names of colours are co-ordinated with coloured squares. When he hears the order "fetch me a red flower", he draws his finger across the chart from the word "red" to a certain square, and goes and looks for a flower which has the same colour as the square. Now there certainly is such a way of searching, says Wittgenstein, if for instance one looks for an unusual shade of some colour – but it isn't the only or the usual way. Usually we go, look about us, walk up to a flower and pick it, without comparing it to anything. And the actual problem – how does one get from the word to a flower? – is not, in any case, solved by the above-offered explanation. For how does one get from the *spoken* word "red" to the *written* name of that colour in the chart? We could again, of course, imagine some sort of chart, that should now guide us. "But

— writes Wittgenstein — no chart guides us; no act of memory, nothing, will mediate between the written sign and the sound."¹⁷ In the last analysis, a sign is followed by the action without there being any kind of mediation between them. "Consider the order — suggests Wittgenstein in one of his most striking examples — 'imagine a red patch'. You are not tempted in this case to think that *before* obeying you must have imagined a red patch to serve you as a pattern for the red patch which you were ordered to imagine."¹⁸ One is, as a child, says Wittgenstein, *trained to react* in a certain way to colour words and to words generally; and the success of the training, the fact that every normal person reacts to colour words in the *same* way, makes in this respect understanding and communication possible at all.

The moral of the above examples (and of the innumerable similar ones Wittgenstein constructed between 1931 and 1936) is a negative one. Our actions, in the last analysis, are not guided by reflection; and successful communication must be regarded, so to speak, as a miracle. Liberal anthropology, based on the enlightened conception of man as guided by reason, thus turns out to be quite untenable. Now the negative observations Wittgenstein makes are not, at first, paralleled, in his writings, by positive suggestions as to a traditionalist anthropology. From 1937 on, however, the outlines of such an anthropology gradually emerge. Some main steps in this process of theoretical development are represented by Wittgenstein's use of the term "Unerbittlichkeit" (inexorability) from 1937 on, of the term "Gepflogenheit" (custom) from 1943 on, and of the expressions "konform urteilen" (judge in conformity) and "Autoritäten anerkennen" (recognize authorities) in 1950 and 1951. As to the external circumstances in which the transitions here indicated occurred, it may be noted that the years 1937–38 and 1943 represent important stages in Wittgenstein's life. The confession Fania Pascal speaks about¹⁹ reflects, in 1937, a psychological crisis, and 1938 is the year of the *Anschluß*, of Wittgenstein's application for a British citizenship and of his plan to publish the existing version of the *Philosophical Investigations*; 1943 being the year in which that plan was considered for the second time.

The application of a word — e.g. the word "red" — consists in *following* a certain *rule*. Indeed the phenomenon of following a rule plays an altogether central part in our thinking and acting. One follows grammatical rules when speaking; logical ones when reasoning; mathematical ones when calculating. What does it actually mean, however:

to follow a rule? Well, one is *guided* by the rule; like by an order. There seems to be a gulf, however, between any order and its performance. "When we give an order — writes Wittgenstein in 1933 —, it can look as if the ultimate thing sought by the order had to remain unexpressed, as there is always a gulf between an order and its execution. Say I want someone to make a particular movement, say to raise his arm. To make it quite clear, I do the movement. This picture seems unambiguous till we ask: how does he know that *he is to make that movement?* — How does he know at all what use he is to make of the signs I give him, whatever they are? — Perhaps I shall now try to supplement the order by means of further signs, by pointing from myself to him, making encouraging gestures, etc. Here it looks as if the order were beginning to stammer."²⁰ A sign-post, an arrow for instance, can be regarded as a simple rule²¹ — but even the sign-post begins to stammer, if one keeps asking oneself: in *which* direction should I then go — how should I *interpret* that arrow? At every step, suggests Wittgenstein in a remark written in 1936, different *decisions* seem to be possible²², since a rule does not determine its own application. "Then can whatever I do be brought into accord with the rule?" By 1944, Wittgenstein is ready to reject this question. "Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule — say a sign-post — got to do with my actions? What sort of connexion is there here? — Well, perhaps this one: I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it. — But that is only to give a causal connexion; to tell how it has come about that we now go by the sign-post; not what this going-by-the-sign really consists in. On the contrary; I have further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom."²³ The correct application of a sign is the application upon which people agree; this very fact of agreement has to be recorded, indeed demanded²⁴, if we want to grasp the *possibility* of linguistic actions or, for that matter, thinking, at all. The phenomenon of language rests on the regularity of, on the agreement in, behaviour. This agreement must be something quite fundamental, certainly not of the kind one can argue about — it is, rather, the basis of any argument, any discussion. "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements."²⁵ Even in order to err, writes Wittgenstein in one of his last aphorisms, a man must already *judge in conformity* with mankind.²⁶

It is here, in the remarks written during the last two years of his

life, that Wittgenstein's traditionalism, and, in particular, the close connexion of this traditionalism to his later theories, becomes most apparent. One must, writes Wittgenstein, "recognize certain authorities in order to make judgments at all"²⁷; authorities, for instance, like our *school*²⁸, or our inherited world-picture²⁹; *foundations*³⁰, against which any doubt is hollow³¹. "My life" – writes Wittgenstein – "Consists in my being content to accept many things."³² One must, in particular, be content to accept inherited *language-games*. The language-game is there – like our life.³³ The thesis that language-games, i.e. forms of life, have to be accepted, that they are what is *given*, is of course there in the *Investigations* too, and is indeed, from 1931 on, implicit throughout Wittgenstein's writings. In any endeavour to criticize a given linguistic tradition, only another linguistic tradition can serve as a standard. Language, then, cannot be subjected to criticism from the standpoint of "pure" thinking. Languages come into being and become obsolete, and different linguistic traditions become interconnected, exerting a soft pressure on each other. Important thereby is that a language must always be something that has *grown organically*³⁴; formalised languages are merely adjuncts, extensions of everyday language. "Our language – writes Wittgenstein in that well-known passage – can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses."³⁵

Lovingly rests Wittgenstein's gaze upon this natural manifoldness of language. He does not search for something "common" behind the diversity of linguistic phenomena, he does not search for the "essence" of language, with reference to which one could introduce, as it were, a new linguistic order. Our language – and the time it reflects – suffers, it is true, from many illnesses, and Wittgenstein certainly does not want to *conserve* "the darkness of this time."³⁶ But the sickness of a time, says Wittgenstein in a famous dictum, is cured by an alteration in the mode of human life – and that alteration is brought about by some cause or other, as the result of some development or other; but not, however, through a medicine that an individual could purposely invent.³⁷

University of Budapest

NOTES

* In presenting this paper I am essentially indebted to the work of G. H. von Wright. As early as 1955, in his "Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Biographical Sketch" (*Philosophical Review*, vol. 64), Professor von Wright suggested that in Wittgenstein's philosophy there are dimensions different from merely those of linguistic analysis; and in his editorial work, Professor von Wright constantly strives to represent the original, chronological, order of composition of Wittgenstein's remarks, thereby enabling the discovery of such logical and psychological patterns in Wittgenstein's thinking that are sometimes veiled by the thematic arrangements Wittgenstein himself or others prepared. I am particularly indebted to Professor von Wright's paper "The Origin and Composition of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*", and to two lists, prepared by Professor von Wright's assistant, Mr. André Maury, giving the manuscript sources of the remarks in *Zettel* and *Philosophical Investigations* respectively. A precise formulation of the ideas here presented would have been impossible without the use of these, as yet unpublished, materials.

¹ *On Certainty*, § 132.

² In the 1938 Foreword to an early version of the *Philosophical Investigations*. The words are: "in unserem dunkeln Zeitalter". TS 225, p.iii. I am using the catalogue number given in G. H. von Wright, "The Wittgenstein Papers", *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 78 (1969), pp. 483-503.

³ This is how I interpret the relevant passage in the letter of introduction written by Keynes, upon Wittgenstein's request, to the Soviet Ambassador in London. "I must leave it to [Wittgenstein]" - wrote Keynes in that letter - "to tell you his reasons for wanting to go to Russia. He is not a member of the Communist Party, but has strong sympathies with the way of life which he believes the new régime in Russia stands for." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford; 1974, p. 136. The letter in which Wittgenstein formulates his request is dated 6. 7. 1935. "You would have to say in your introduction" - writes Wittgenstein - "that I am your personal friend and that you are sure that I am in no way politically dangerous (that is, if this is your opinion). . . . I am sure that you partly understand my reasons for wanting to go to Russia and I admit that they are partly bad and even childish reasons but it is true also that behind all that there are deep and even good reasons." *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴ Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein. With a Memoir*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford; 1967, p. 121.

⁵ Fania Pascal, "Wittgenstein. A Personal Memoir", *Encounter*, vol. 16, August 1973, p. 25.

⁶ Cf. e.g. the following remark: "Austria and the Austrians have sunk so miserably low since the war that it's too dismal to talk about." From a letter to Russell, dated 28. 11. 1921. *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore*, p. 98.

⁷ Karl Mannheim, "Das konservative Denken". *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, vol. 57 (1927), p. 105. - I am indebted to Dr. D. C. Bloor of the University of Edinburgh for directing my attention to the Wittgenstein-Mannheim relation. Cf. his paper "Wittgenstein and Mannheim on the Sociology of Mathematics", *Studies in the History and Philosophy of*

Science, vol. 4 (1973). In a letter Dr. Bloor kindly wrote to me in 1974, he suggested that the later Wittgenstein could be regarded as a conservative thinker in the sense defined by Mannheim in the above-quoted essay. I think this is a correct and very fruitful suggestion. I would like to emphasize, however, that my aim in the present paper is not to point out that Wittgenstein was, in the technical sense defined by Mannheim, a conservative, but to show that he was conservative *sans phrase*, and, in particular, that his philosophy provides novel and cogent arguments for a new conservatism or traditionalism.

⁸ Wittgenstein mentions Spengler in his comments on Frazer, written in 1931 ("Bemerkungen über Frazers *The Golden Bough*", *Synthese*, vol. 17 (1967), p. 241). In the same year he makes another, highly interesting, reference to Spengler. "Es ist, glaube ich, eine Wahrheit darin – writes Wittgenstein –, wenn ich denke, dass ich eigentlich in meinem Denken nur reproduktiv bin. Ich glaube, ich habe nie eine Gedankenbewegung *erfunden*, sondern sie wurde mir immer von jemand anderem gegeben. Ich habe sie nur sogleich leidenschaftlich zu meinem Klärungsversuch aufgegriffen. So haben mich Boltzmann, Hertz, Russell, Kraus, Spengler, Sraffa beeinflusst." (Wittgenstein, *General Remarks*. Compiled by G. H. von Wright. Unpublished. Vol. II, p. 256.) There is, again, an important reference to Spengler in *Philosophische Grammatik*, Part II, written in 1932 or 1933. Discussing some mathematical term, Wittgenstein says that this term, just like other terms, does not have a clear-cut application – it is applied in many, more or less related senses, "wie etwa die Wörter 'Volk', 'König', 'Religion', etc.; siehe Spengler". (Ludwig Wittgenstein *Schriften*, vol. 4, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1969, p. 299.)

⁹ Some of the stylistic features which first emerge in the *Philosophische Grammatik* are: fictitious dialogues, unanswered questions, peculiar and enigmatic similes – and the constant use of "Du".

¹⁰ Cf. A. W. Levi, "Wittgenstein as Dialectician". In K. T. Fann (ed.), *Wittgenstein: The Man and His Philosophy*, Dell, New York, 1967, pp. 372f.

¹¹ Cf. R. L. Goodstein, "Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mathematics". In Alice Ambrose and Morris Lazerowitz (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Philosophy and Language*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1972.

¹² Der Großstadtbewohner, der reine, traditionslose, in formlos fluktuierender Masse auftretender Tatsachenmensch, irreligiös, mit einer tiefen Abneigung gegen das Bauerntum (und dessen höchste Form, den Landadel), also ein ungeheurer Schritt zum Anorganischen, zum Ende" – a type characterized by a "kühler Tatsachensinn", having no "Ehrfurcht vor dem Überlieferten und Gewachsenen". Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, Bd. I, C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, München 1919, pp. 45f.

¹³ "Rußland. Die Leidenschaft verspricht etwas. Unser Gerede dagegen ist kraftlos." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Schriften*, vol. 3, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1967, p. 142.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁵ This is the point that Wittgenstein constantly makes in his comments on Frazer.

X

- ¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophy and Language*, pp. 15f.
- ¹⁷ *Philosophische Grammatik*, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Schriften*, vol. 4, p. 96.
- ¹⁸ *The Blue and Brown Boos*. Harper & Row, New York, 1960, p. 3.
- ¹⁹ Fania Pascal, *op.cit.*, pp. 33ff.
- ²⁰ *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, § 433. — This passage occurs practically word-for-word in *Philosophische Grammatik*, on p. 133 of the Suhrkamp edition.
- ²¹ *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, § 85.
- ²² *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, § 186.
- ²³ *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, § 198.
- ²⁴ It is in this connection that the term "inexorability" emerges in 1937. Cf. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1964. Part I, §§ 4, 118.
- ²⁵ *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, § 242.
- ²⁶ *On Certainty*, § 156.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, § 493.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, §§ 47, 664.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, § 94.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, § 449.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, § 312.
- ³² *Ibid.*, § 344.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, § 559.
- ³⁴ Fann, *op. cit.*, p. 35. From the "Autobiography" of Rudolf Carnap.
- ³⁵ *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, § 18.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, "Preface".
- ³⁷ *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Part I, Appendix II, § 4.