

The Politics of Wittgenstein

Matthew J. Moore, *University of Vermont*

Wittgenstein often used examples of strange and unfamiliar forms of life to unsettle our assumptions. For example, he wrote: "What reply could I make to the adults of a tribe who believe that people sometimes go to the moon (perhaps that is how they interpret their dreams)?"¹ These examples raise the implicit question, What would it be like to encounter such people? Would we be able, as Wittgenstein put it, to "find our feet" with them?² Many of the essays in the two helpful, stimulating volumes under review raise a related question: What is it like to meet—or be—Wittgensteinians?

One version of that question asks what attitude we ought to take toward our own form of life. Ought we to take the pragmatist view that our form of life is a solid if unjustified ground for our arguments and judgments, or the deconstructivist view that our form of life is inevitably shot through with contradictions, aporias, and instabilities? It is this question that the nine essays in *The Legacy of Wittgenstein* address.³ Similarly, ought we to interpret Wittgenstein as a conservative, grounding meaning in the brute given of our cultural tradition,⁴ as a relativist claiming that forms of life cannot be criticized from the outside,⁵ as a tolerance-promoting skeptic,⁶ or as a perfectionist liberal?⁷ What consequences for our own ideas and actions

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), §106.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1958), II §xi.

3. The essays started life as papers at a conference of the same name held in November 1999 at the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster and sponsored by the Austrian Cultural Institute in London.

4. See J. C. Nyiri, "Wittgenstein's Later Work in Relation to Conservatism," in *Wittgenstein and His Time*, ed. B. F. McGuinness (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

5. See Ernest Gellner, "The Gospel According to Ludwig," *The American Scholar* 53 (1984): 243-63.

6. See Aryeh Botwinick, *Wittgenstein, Scepticism, and Political Participation: An Essay in the Epistemology of Democratic Theory* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).

7. See the discussion below of Eldridge.

are tangled up with how we interpret Wittgenstein? The twelve essays of *The Grammar of Politics* examine these questions, as well as the voluminous existing literature around them. After giving a brief overview of the two volumes, I look at these two sets of questions in more depth, and argue that they are deeply connected to one another.

I. The Legacy of Wittgenstein

Although *The Legacy of Wittgenstein* is ostensibly a dialogue between pragmatist and deconstructivist readings, only one essay—Hilary Putnam’s “Rules, attunement, and ‘applying words to the world’: The struggle to understand Wittgenstein’s vision of language”—actively defends the pragmatist view that meaning is reliably grounded in a stable if unjustifiable form of life. Even in that essay, Putnam’s concern is to defend the pragmatist view not against the deconstructivist view, but rather against the interpretation, associated with the work of G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, that meaning is dependent on preexisting (and articulable, at least in principle) rules.

Similarly, an explicit defense of the deconstructivist interpretation of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language is given only in Henry Staten’s excellent “Wittgenstein’s deconstructive legacy.” Staten’s analysis rests on a subtle and insightful distinction between two uses of the word “game” in the *Philosophical Investigations*. When Wittgenstein discusses the many different meanings of “game” as an illustration of the lack of a common feature that binds together our various uses of a word,⁸ he appears to be a pragmatist. Nothing fundamental holds our uses of “game” together, and nothing needs to do so for the word to continue to be useful in its myriad contexts. But when Wittgenstein uses the word “game” to group together the various different things we do with language, we are tempted to attribute to language as a whole the same pragmatic stability that we find in some of its applications. Yet there is no strong reason to think this. While language sometimes reliably serves our concrete needs and concerns, it also frequently ensnares and entangles us, revealing gaps just where we assumed we had certainties, and committing us to conclusions we neither foresaw nor desired. In Staten’s view, the heart of the pragmatist reading of Wittgenstein is a conflation of the family resemblance among actual games with the more metaphorical description of our various uses of language as being (like) games. The actual practice of language is more complex and less stable: “for deconstruction, by contrast, what social reality reveals is an illimitable crosscutting and abyssal embedding of contexts, not no world but an excess of world beyond what the benevolence of the pragmatist lawgiver can contain, in fact or in principle.”⁹

8. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §§65–67.

9. Henry Staten, “Wittgenstein’s Deconstructive Legacy,” in *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*, 49.

Linda Zerilli's "Wittgenstein: Between pragmatism and deconstruction" is more representative of the overall tone of *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*. Her argument is that Wittgenstein is best understood as charting a course between the excessive stability of pragmatism and the potential boundlessness of deconstruction. Rather than wishing to settle on one extreme or the other, in Zerilli's view, Wittgenstein is concerned with maintaining debate and preventing us from becoming committed to a partial and thus misleading position. She writes: "My claim will be that both deconstructivist and pragmatic appropriations of Wittgenstein misread this notion of the common, attributing to it either too much solidity or too little stability, and consequently missing what is distinctive in his ongoing interrogation of the philosopher that sits in each and every one of us."¹⁰ Two other essays—Stephen Mulhall's "Deconstruction and the ordinary," and Ludwig Nagl's brief and fragmentary "'How hard I find it to see what is right in front of me': Wittgenstein's quest for 'simplicity and ordinarieness'"—are also primarily concerned with the value to be had from putting Wittgenstein and deconstruction into dialogue.

As is inevitable in a collection based on conference proceedings, some chapters of *The Legacy of Wittgenstein* have relatively little to do with the ostensible organizing theme. Allan Janik's "Wittgenstein's critical hermeneutics: from physics to aesthetics" and James Conant's "A prolegomenon to the reading of later Wittgenstein" are probably best understood as contributions to the art of interpreting Wittgenstein's texts, rather than to the discussion of his influence and affiliations. Janik focuses on the influence that Heinrich Hertz's efforts to reconceptualize physics had on Wittgenstein, while Conant argues that there is a greater continuity of purpose in Wittgenstein's earlier and later work than is generally recognized. What changes, according to Conant, is not the goal, but rather the methods that Wittgenstein employs to achieve it. The core of his argument is this: "To understand all this—that is, to understand why, in Wittgenstein's later work, the aim of elucidation becomes that of returning us to the ordinary, yet in such a way that we are, under the pressure of philosophy, able to recognize it *as* ordinary (as if seeing it for the first time)—is to understand what is genuinely *new* in Wittgenstein's later philosophy."¹¹

Finally, two last essays, by Chantal Mouffe and David Owen, begin to shift from the question of the proper interpretation of Wittgenstein to the question of his relevance for politics. Since I discuss both essays below, I omit a summary of them here.

II. The Grammar of Politics

Cressida J. Heyes's *The Grammar of Politics* is a larger and broader collection, which takes on the already extensive debates about the political significance of

10. Linda M. G. Zerilli, "Wittgenstein: Between pragmatism and deconstruction," in *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*, 26.

11. James Conant, "A prolegomenon to the reading of later Wittgenstein," in *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*, 130.

Wittgenstein's work. The book's twelve essays are divided into three thematic sections. The first is aimed at undermining the influential reading of Wittgenstein as endorsing some version of conservatism, the second at developing an alternative interpretation of the political implications of Wittgenstein, and the third at applying Wittgensteinian analysis to concrete political problems.

Although, as I argue in greater detail below, some are more successful than others, the eight essays of the first two sections have a great deal in common.¹² A quote from David Cerbone's "The Limits of Conservatism: Wittgenstein on 'Our Life' and 'Our Concepts'" nicely captures the theme that runs through almost all of them: "Rather than a contribution to any specific *thesis* concerning the status of our concepts, Wittgenstein's reminders concerning 'our concepts' and 'our life' are directed toward the urge to construct philosophically puzzling and problematic pictures of our relation to the world. A picture that depicts us as inhabiting a form of life, as something that contains and determines our applications of concepts, is one example."¹³ In other words, Wittgenstein's goal was less to develop any positive thesis about the status of language or meaning than to repeatedly attempt to prevent us from coming to premature and limiting conclusions about such questions. Politically, the relevance of Wittgenstein's work is much the same: not to underwrite any particular positive doctrine, but rather to resist unnecessarily restrictive ideas about how things are and must be.

Two essays among the first two sections that depart from this general theme are Allan Janik's "Notes on the Natural History of Politics" and Richard Eldridge's "Wittgenstein and the Conversation of Justice" (discussed in depth below). Janik's essay puts Wittgenstein into an interesting and fruitful conversation with William Connolly's well known idea of "essentially contested concepts" in politics.¹⁴ Janik nicely lays out the similarity between Connolly's idea that many of the central concepts in politics are and must be contested (indeed, that part of their role is to be the objects of debate and wrangling) and the implication of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language that debate about the meanings and relationships of words is always possible. Janik goes on to offer a valuable thesis as an addition to both theories: Essential contestability emerges not because some words that play a special role in politics are subject to debate and struggle over their meaning, but rather because *all words* are

12. Those essays are James Tully's "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy: Understanding Practices of Critical Reflection," David Cerbone's "The Limits of Conservatism: Wittgenstein on 'Our Life' and 'Our Concepts,'" Dennis McManus's "Wittgenstein, Fetishism, and Nonsense in Practice," David Owen's "Genealogy as Perspicuous Representation," Allan Janik's "Notes on the Natural History of Politics," Richard Eldridge's "Wittgenstein and the Conversation of Justice," Linda Zerilli's "Doing Without Knowing: Feminism's Politics of the Ordinary," and Jonathan Havercroft's "On Seeing Liberty As."

13. David R. Cerbone, "The Limits of Conservatism: Wittgenstein on 'Our Life' and 'Our Concepts,'" in *The Grammar of Politics*, 51.

14. See William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, Second ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

potentially subject to such struggle, though we do not bother to carry it out in most cases. Essential contestability is a feature of language generally, precisely because, as Wittgenstein saw, meaning was determined not by rules but by use, and use is always subject to contest and debate. Janik writes: "Connolly has rightly identified the political character of essential contestability; what he has not undertaken to do is to argue that politics inheres in the family resemblance character of concepts."¹⁵

The three essays of the last thematic section apply Wittgenstein to concrete problems of politics and culture. Carl Elliott's "Does Your Patient Have a Beetle in His Box? Language-Games and the Spread of Psychopathology" asks why so many Americans have come to think of themselves as having some form of mental disorder. While Elliott ably demonstrates how meaning being determined by use can lead to highly flexible categories, which make possible the expansions and contractions of psychiatric diagnoses, his conclusions seem to me not uniquely Wittgensteinian. In response to the question "Why mental disorder at all?"¹⁶ Elliott replies: "The first force pushing toward the expansion of psychopathology today is medical technology. The second force is the market. Medical technology produces medical treatments; medical treatments turn unpleasantness into medical problems; the market puts these treatments up for sale."¹⁷ While this seems like a plausible claim, we don't need Wittgenstein to arrive at it, nor do we need Wittgenstein to explain why the categories of psychopathology are highly flexible—ignorance, innovation, greed, sloppiness, over-diagnosis, and any number of other explanations are equally plausible. Elliot shows us *how* Wittgenstein might explain the role of contemporary psychopathology, but not *why* this explanation is the best one available.

Richard Shusterman's "Wittgenstein on Bodily Feelings: Explanation and Melioration in Philosophy of Mind, Art, and Politics" is a deft, lyrical examination of Wittgenstein's relationship to the body. The major thrust of his argument is that while Wittgenstein rejects grounding psychological experience in bodily experience, he does not deny the value of bodily experience per se. To the contrary, it seems that Wittgenstein should be open to the unique role that the body can play in self-awareness: "If philosophy involves not merely knowledge of one's mind, but ameliorative self-mastery (as Wittgenstein fervently believed), then attention to somaesthetic feelings should be crucial to philosophy's task of 'working on one's self.'"¹⁸

Finally, Wendy Lynne Lee's "'But One Day Man Opens His Seeing Eye': The Politics of Anthropomorphizing Language" is an ambitious attempt to argue that anthropomorphic language is deeply bound up with hierarchy and oppression. It is

15. Allan Janik, "Notes on the Natural History of Politics," in *The Grammar of Politics*, 108.

16. Carl Elliott, "Does Your Patient Have a Beetle in His Box? Language-Games and the Spread of Psychopathology," in *The Grammar of Politics*, 193.

17. Elliott, "Does Your Patient," 193-94.

18. Richard Shusterman, "Wittgenstein on Bodily Feelings: Explanation and Melioration in Philosophy of Mind, Art, and Politics," in *The Grammar of Politics*, 211.

a challenging piece, and unfortunately I cannot summarize it in the short space available. However, I do want to mention one especially interesting aspect of her analysis. The essay is built on what seems to me a brilliant and fertile insight. When I think of Wittgenstein's idea of "meaning as use," I always think of the investigation as going from word to practice. How do I know what the word "game" means? By looking at the practices in which we use it (perhaps in several different ways). Lee reverses the direction of investigation, in effect suggesting that if we look at our various practices with words, we can discover new and surprising things about what our words mean. Look at all the many ways in which we use "game," and you might just discover a common thread (or an element of family resemblance) that you had not noticed before. Similarly, by looking at the work that anthropomorphizing language does in the world, we may discover that it is tied up with ideas of domination and oppression with which we had not previously associated it. The intent is not to try to identify the one true meaning of the words, which would go against the whole point of Wittgenstein's approach, but rather to find a new way to uncover some of the otherwise hidden, partial connections among our concepts.

III. Forms of Life and Critical Reflection

The Grammar of Politics begins with a reworked version of James Tully's classic essay "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy: Understanding Practices of Critical Reflection."¹⁹ Tully's essay provides a convenient entry point to a more substantive investigation of both of the volumes under review because it lays out what is appealing and potentially disquieting in Wittgenstein's epistemology. In grounding meaning and knowledge in practices and form of life, has Wittgenstein closed off the possibility of serious challenge to those practices, or has he emphasized their contingency and possible malleability? This is the root question behind the large and rapidly growing literature about the political significance of Wittgenstein, and also behind the question of which philosophical tradition may rightfully claim Wittgenstein as progenitor. Thus Tully's essay starts a conversation about the fundamental issue that motivates both of the books under review.

Tully's concern is to argue that there are limits to how much we can, or need to, reflect critically on our form of life. His goal is to fend off both the claim, sponsored here by Habermas, that we are responsible subjects only when we have a critical justification for our beliefs, and the idea, sponsored here by the early Charles Taylor, that understanding is deeply dependent on interpretation.

Habermas's concern is with what Kant called autonomy—the idea that we are free and rational to the extent that we act only upon rules and judgments that we have arrived at reflectively. Tully summarizes Habermas's view thus: "For him,

19. Tully's essay originally appeared in *Political Theory* 17 (1989):172-204.

[coming to an agreement] must combine two types of critical reflection. In the first, transcendental and reconstructive in form, reason must turn back on itself and determine the conditions of possibility of a rational agreement. In the second, emancipatory in form, everyone affected by the agreement must in principle engage in critical discussion to justify the rules governing their political life.”²⁰

Tully invites us to imagine a meeting or conference where Habermas stands up and says: “I am Jürgen Habermas and I believe that the workplace ought to be organized democratically.”²¹ In reply, another attendee says: “I think you are being insincere and untruthful and deceiving us about your name. You are not really Jürgen Habermas.”²² The beauty of this challenge is precisely its triviality, for that reveals how very many assumptions and judgments are at work in the background of our explicit claims.

Although it would be too strong to say that Wittgenstein’s later work contains an explicit theory of justification, his various comments about the bases of our knowledge indicate what is probably best called a contextualist approach.²³ Knowledge claims are justified not by reference to a foundation of non-inferential knowledge, nor due to their mutual coherence, but rather by reference to our habits, practices, and overall form of life. In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein wrote: “How am I to obey a rule?”—if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way that 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.’”²⁴

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein deepens this argument by maintaining that all justification necessarily takes place within a system of beliefs and practices (i.e., a form of life). Such a system must, if justification is to come to an end (that is, succeed), rest on some ultimate grounds—some beliefs or practices that are the final criteria of truth and falsity (now, for these purposes). Yet those final criteria cannot themselves be either true or false, since there is nothing against which to evaluate them: “All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life.”²⁵

20. James Tully, “Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy: Understanding Practices of Critical Reflection,” in *The Grammar of Politics*, 19.

21. Tully, “WPP,” 24.

22. Tully, “WPP,” 24.

23. See Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

24. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §217.

25. Wittgenstein, *OC*, §105.

Thus, in Tully's imaginary example, Habermas's claim that he supports workplace democracy takes place and makes sense in reference to a broader context that is not questioned—that he is who he says he is, that the proceedings are indeed a conference and not a sham, that we know what a workplace and democratic organization are, and so on. Although any and all of these contextually assumed elements could themselves be questioned, they cannot all be questioned at once (for then what would we judge them against?), and they cannot be questioned at all if we want to continue with the business of discussing how workplaces ought to be organized. Freedom and rationality do not depend solely on critical reflection, but also on our ability to take a great deal for granted while we reflect on some narrow topic.

The danger of Habermas's view is that it seeks to convince us that there is a single path and method to securing our freedom—critical self-awareness. Tully worries that this will lead us to ignore the many other language-games of criticism and freedom, which may be effective in places where Habermas's method—itself a genuinely useful practice—is not. For example, Tully suggests, we might sometimes be better served by the Nietzschean/Foucauldian strategy of genealogy: "In our complex language-games of freedom, we provisionally follow the conventional boundaries in trying to reach understanding/agreement on some issue and we also play Foucault's game of calling into question one conventional boundary at a time (by means of a genealogy of its historical role as a boundary) and of seeking to go beyond it."²⁶

If Habermas's mistake is unintentionally to confine us to too narrow a conception of how to pursue freedom, some of Taylor's early work seems to promise more freedom than is plausible. As Tully points out, Taylor and Wittgenstein share the view that we are inescapably embedded in practices, traditions, and conventions that we have not made and cannot entirely control. Yet Taylor departs from Wittgenstein in arguing that human beings are fundamentally interpreting beings. Tully writes: "He sometimes suggests . . . that interpretation is not simply one method, procedure, or activity among many, but that being engaged in the activity of interpretation is our basic way of being in the world."²⁷ The danger here is that we might come to believe that our freedom and rationality lie in an ability to become reflectively aware of our interpreting, and perhaps also to change it (though Tully does not emphasize this latter point).

One of the considerations that apparently led Wittgenstein to the view that meaning and knowledge are rooted in practices or forms of life is the problem of the indeterminacy and potentially infinite regress of interpretations. He wrote:

"But how can a rule shew me what I have to do at *this* point? Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the rule."—This is not what we ought to say, but rather: any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it inter-

26. Tully, "WPP," 32.

27. Tully, "WPP," 36.

prets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations themselves do not determine meaning. . . . 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.²⁸

Saying that meaning and knowledge are rooted in our practices and form of life is not to say that they are more or less arbitrary, nor that we are aware of their ultimate contingency. In fact, Wittgenstein's argument rests on just the opposite point: words have meaning precisely because the connection between word and practice is immediate. Interpretation is a rare activity, resorted to only when our ordinary practices fail. Taylor's mistake, according to Tully, is to see meaning as rooted in our *ideas* about the world, whereas Wittgenstein's argument is that meaning is rooted in our *way of acting* in the world. We do not need to become aware of our practices of interpretation to be free and rational (since such practices do not underlie our daily activities), and, crucially, we are not free to change our meanings or practices once we have become aware of them. Change may be possible, perhaps even radical change, but it is necessarily a tectonic affair—an issue of shifting a whole way of life, rather than of changing the lens through which we see a part of the world.

If Tully emphasizes the non-reflective stability of our forms of life, David Owen (who has essays in both volumes, as do Linda Zerilli and Allan Janik) argues that Wittgenstein's goal is to provide us with tools to free ourselves from the potentially despotic character of our received understandings. In his contribution to *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*,²⁹ Owen argues that there are profound similarities between the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Stanley Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein. He writes:

In other words, it is in its exemplification of just those features which Cavell's Wittgensteinian approach also exemplifies that deconstruction's significance for political philosophy lies. In both cases, an acknowledgement of the violence involved in the occlusion or repression of salient aspects of our political identities drives a commitment to reminding us of the contingent character of our pictures, that they are pictures forged in a particular set of circumstances and in relation to particular practical questions, and opening up the space of our political imaginations by dissolving the dogmatic claims "Things *must/cannot* be thus and so."³⁰

His contribution to *The Grammar of Politics* appears to represent a more developed version of his interpretation.³¹ Owen's analysis there centers on a passage

28. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §198.

29. David Owen, "Democracy, Perfectionism and 'Undetermined Messianic Hope': Cavell, Derrida and the ethos of democracy-to-come," in *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*, 139-56.

30. Owen, "Democracy," 156.

31. David Owen, "Genealogy as Perspicuous Representation," in *The Grammar of Politics*, 82-96.

from the *Philosophical Investigations*: “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.”³² The danger, precisely because our practices do not present themselves to us as interpretations, but rather simply as the way things are, is that we will be unable to think about the world in a new way even when the old way no longer serves us. Owen calls this experience *aspectival captivity*, and he argues that one of Wittgenstein’s main philosophical goals was to help us free ourselves from this problem: “Thus Wittgenstein’s purpose, expressed through his advocacy of ‘perspicuous representation,’ is that of philosophy as directed to enabling us to free ourselves from our captivation to pictures.”³³

Where Tully argues that we do not have, and do not need, a critical, reflective understanding of our form of life as a whole, Owen argues that Wittgenstein provides tools for us to engage in just that kind of analysis, but on a small, local scale, and in response to particular problems. The goal is not to assess every practice, but only those that prevent us, now, from “[making] sense of ourselves in ways that connect up to, and enable the expression of, our cares and commitments.”³⁴

A third essay in *The Grammar of Politics*, this one by Jonathan Havercroft,³⁵ demonstrates the ease with which we can slide from Owen’s limited, tactical attempts to get critical perspective on our practices to the more ambitious attempt to make our forms of life explicit and self-critical that Tully warns against. In essence, Havercroft’s argument is very similar to Owen’s: the counterpart of being captivated by one way of seeing a picture is being unable to see the picture from a different perspective. Where Owen talks about aspectival captivity, Havercroft speaks of *aspect-blindness*. And, like Owen, Havercroft believes that Wittgenstein’s approach to philosophy is primarily therapeutic, aimed at helping us to see multiple aspects and thus avoid being captured by any one of them.

Where he departs from Owen and Tully is in arguing that it might be possible to become aware of *all* of the relevant aspects of a practice and thus permanently avoid the limited perspectives that constantly threaten. Havercroft’s immediate focus is on the many competing conceptions of liberty in political theory (he looks at the work of Isaiah Berlin, Charles Taylor, and Quentin Skinner), and he makes what seems to me the quite correct argument that we should view these differing conceptions not as rivals for the title of the One True Idea of Liberty, but rather as different aspects of a complex and multi-faceted concept. But he goes on to argue that it might be possible to get such a perspicuous view that one could get a synoptic grasp of all of the aspects at once:

32. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §115.

33. Owen, “Genealogy,” 86.

34. Owen, “Genealogy,” 86.

35. Jonathan Havercroft, “On Seeing Liberty As,” in *The Grammar of Politics*, 149-64.

[T]he political philosopher, through a perspicuous representation of the different aspects of liberty being used in the debate, might be able to demonstrate how the debate in large part is the result of a confusion between the parties owing to the fact that each side experiences aspect-blindness with respect to the way the other side *sees* liberty *as*. Finally, she could, upon examining the different aspects of liberty, *see* a new way of looking at the debate, and propose an alternative way of *seeing* liberty *as*.³⁶

Havercroft makes two mistakes here. The first is privileging the metaperspective. From a Wittgensteinian point of view, the political theorist's synoptic view of the various meanings of the word "liberty" is itself just one more language-game. It would be perfectly reasonable for people engaged in a debate about whether some practice aided or damaged liberty to say to the political theorist: "Your explanations are fine for the classroom or the archive, but what we want to know is what liberty *really is*. Unless you can tell us that, please stop talking." There is no meta-rule about which language game is appropriate for any particular task, and thus no reason to believe that the political theorist's language-game will necessarily be helpful or persuasive.

Havercroft's second misstep, I believe, is akin to the problem faced by dictionary makers. His project begins in a descriptive mode, seeking to help us disentangle and learn to recognize the many different uses of liberty. But at some point the project subtly turns normative, putting the political theorist in a position to identify and possibly correct usage. The problem arises when we begin to encounter variant cases. How many variants can we classify as errors before we need to change the definition? As the form of life changes—as we begin to think that freedom is fundamentally about the ability to fulfill consumer needs, or that the right to drive a car represents a fundamental liberty—the various aspects of meaning of liberty will change. Some may fall away entirely, while others will merge, and new distinctions appear. Havercroft's theorist is then in the awkward position of trying to enforce usage rules on practices that have changed, and to which the rules no longer apply.

To the extent that political theorists do engage in the synoptic work that Havercroft proposes—which I think is an excellent idea on its own merits—what we are doing is engaging in one language-game among many. If we succeed in convincing others of our views, that will be deeply satisfying and perhaps even socially useful. But we will have succeeded by driving other language games out of the debate, not by having achieved a metaperspective about our language practices.

Thus, Tully, Owen and Havercroft help us by triangulation to get a clearer view of Wittgenstein's stance on the stability of our form of life. As Tully argues, our form of life need not be (and, flatly, *is not*) grounded in anything deeper than itself. It is

36. Havercroft, "Liberty," 163.

in working order as we find it. Yet, as Owen emphasizes, our form of life may not always serve our purposes well. We are prone to fits of blindness, in which we cannot see beyond the implications of some piece of grammar. By pointing that out, Wittgenstein is helping us to adopt a critical and transformative attitude towards our form of life, but always only for particular, local purposes. Precisely because our form of life has no deeper basis, it cannot be evaluated or changed all at once, though it can be changed piecemeal, as those changes seem necessary to us. Finally, on my reading Havercroft demonstrates the danger of taking this critical attitude too far, in the perennial and alluring hope of getting a comprehensive view of our form of life, and thus in some way becoming free of its contingencies and limitations. Thus, Wittgenstein insists neither on the utter stability of our form of life nor on its utter contingency, but rather on the dynamic interplay between fixity and variability, as the one or the other better suits our needs. The one constant is our tendency to forget that this dynamism is possible.

IV. Wittgenstein and Positive Politics

As I argued above, the question of the relationship between stability and contingency in our form of life is ultimately also the issue behind the debates over the political implications of Wittgenstein's philosophy.³⁷ Those who read Wittgenstein as a conservative see him as emphasizing stability, while those who read Wittgenstein as a liberal, radical, or skeptic see him as emphasizing contingency. If Tully and Owen are right that Wittgenstein is best understood as emphasizing the *possibility* of change when it suits our interests, what political values follow from that view?

Most of the authors in these two volumes do not attempt to portray Wittgenstein as favoring a substantive political agenda. Like Owen, they suggest that Wittgenstein gives us tools to avoid various problems—aspectival captivity, thoughtless endorsement of tradition, failure of imagination. Such tools could be wielded in the service of a variety of political visions. However, Richard Eldridge, in his essay in *The Grammar of Politics*,³⁸ argues that Wittgenstein's epistemology favors a version of perfectionist liberalism.

Eldridge's concern is to find a way of thinking about politics and making difficult political decisions. He identifies three such traditions. The first, which he calls *political theory*, "seeks to sketch the form of social life to which we rationally ought to aspire, as offering us the necessary and perhaps even sufficient conditions for the full realization of our rational humanity."³⁹ Whereas political theory offers a substantive

37. Cressida Heyes's introduction to *The Grammar of Politics* provides a concise overview of the range of debate on this question, and the bibliography she includes at the end of the volume is an excellent selection of the major work in the area.

38. Richard Eldridge, "Wittgenstein and the Conversation of Justice," in *The Grammar of Politics*, 117-28.

39. Eldridge, "Conversation," 117.

answer to the question of how to make political decisions, the second tradition Eldridge identifies, which he calls *political science*, holds that “there is no ultimate aim and hence no perfect felicity in fulfilling it[;] the best anyone can do is to secure the effective power to satisfy ever-changing desires.”⁴⁰ The third tradition, Ronald Dworkin’s *interpretivism*, tries to strike a balance between the first two: “Neither ideal models of the political good nor consequential assessments of the effects of various regimes, but rather interpretive judgments, expressive of and on behalf of the ways of a democratic political community, is to determine what the law is.”⁴¹

On Eldridge’s analysis, none of these traditions is satisfactory. Political theory often results in “heavy-handed and potentially tyrannical appeals to ideal models of social and personal life.”⁴² Political science, on the other hand, expresses “no aspiration to common rational citizenship and social reciprocity.”⁴³ The bulk of his essay is dedicated to examining whether Dworkin’s interpretive approach can successfully navigate between the two extremes. In common with many other commentators on Dworkin,⁴⁴ Eldridge argues that interpretivism cannot succeed where its rivals fail. Either interpretivism will be so vague that it can tell us nothing about how to proceed with a concrete problem, or it will be so permissive that it would be indistinguishable in outcome from political theory or political science.

So far, so good. Indeed, Eldridge concludes at one point: “There is nothing...deeper than ordinary practice that is available to guide it.”⁴⁵ But he goes on to privilege, illegitimately in my view, one of our many ordinary practices: “That this is an achievement—the refusing of counterfeit necessities in favor of the acceptance of thinking and listening as a human subject in relation to human subjects—albeit one that is almost impossible for us to manage, is something we might learn from Wittgenstein’s voices.”⁴⁶ While that might seem to endorse something like Owen’s view, Eldridge takes it in a more explicitly political direction:

What follows, then, from the condition of the human person that is enacted in *Philosophical Investigations* is, I think, a kind of substantive or weak perfectionist liberalism. . . . The way out of proceduralism and toward substantive liberalism is then to see different ways of life as reasonably contending ways of embodying the good. . . . But this framework will express a commitment to a substantive good—personal autonomy; it will not of itself neutrally settle conflicts about the scope and value of this good.⁴⁷

40. Eldridge, “Conversation,” 118.

41. Eldridge, “Conversation,” 119.

42. Eldridge, “Conversation,” 119.

43. Eldridge, “Conversation,” 119.

44. For example, see Chapter 4 of Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989).

45. Eldridge, “Conversation,” 122.

46. Eldridge, “Conversation,” 127.

47. Eldridge, “Conversation,” 127-28.

On my reading, there are two missteps here. First, Eldridge conflates the problem of individuals becoming trapped in one way of seeing things (Owen's aspectival captivity, or Havercroft's aspect-blindness) with one social group using the power of the state to impose its view on another group. While both problems might be said to spring from the same root—an inability to grasp the contingency of one's view of the world—responding to them requires very different motivations. Overcoming aspect blindness in my own life is deeply in my self-interest, but overcoming my arrogance towards your form of life is fundamentally about me being concerned about *your* self-interest.⁴⁸ It is clear that Wittgenstein wanted to help us with the first task, but there is no strong reason to believe that he wanted to help us with the second.

The second misstep is closely related to the first. Eldridge implies that the mere fact of difference and conflict already somehow entails the appropriate response: toleration and an embrace of plurality. This simply doesn't follow from Wittgenstein. If our views of the world are rooted in our form of life, then presumably any tolerance we possess must come from that form of life itself. If our form of life contains no tolerance then we will display none. Merely recognizing that other people think different things than we do does not—and, on Wittgenstein's theory, cannot—yet tell us how to treat them, or even how to feel about our relationship to our own form of life.

What Eldridge's essay demonstrates, I believe, is why Wittgenstein's philosophy cannot underwrite any positive political program. If meaning is ultimately determined by our form of life, it follows that this must also be true of the meaning of our normative terms. What ought we to value? How ought we to behave? How should we structure politics? All of these questions can be answered only by reference to our form of life. And of course the answers will be subject to the same dynamic interplay of stability and contingency that our form of life as a whole is subject to. Thus, as several of the essays in the two volumes under review demonstrate, the answer to the question of the relevance of Wittgenstein for politics is at root the same as the answer to the question of whether he is better understood as a pragmatist or a deconstructivist. In both cases Wittgenstein points us to the dynamic relationship of stability and contingency in response to our current wants and needs, but in both he refuses (or better, is unable) to say which pole we should prefer at any given moment.

V. Existential Responsibility

Where does all of this leave us? Meaning and judgment are grounded in practices and forms of life that appear to be stable. Yet we can disrupt their stability

48. Treating you well might be in my long-run self-interest, but that's an empirical question rather than an ethical or epistemological one.

through learning to see things in different ways, and in some cases our ability to be self-directing subjects may depend on our doing so. Still, at any given moment our understandings will reflect our current form of life, and our judgments—including those about politics, ethics, and other forms of life—will and can only come from our own form of life. Because our forms of life both constitute and constrain us, we are faced with the difficult task of embodying our practices while recognizing their contingency. (Linda Zerilli's essay in *The Grammar of Politics* does an excellent job of discussing this in terms of the problematic status of the concept *woman*.)⁴⁹ What is it like to be Wittgensteinians? Whatever resolution we arrive at for this difficult balancing act must itself, of course, come from our form of life.

Thus, for me, the most interesting lesson from Wittgenstein is how little philosophy can do for politics. It cannot tell us what to believe, nor can it tell us what attitude to take towards the beliefs we find ourselves always already holding. What it can do is firmly, insistently, even sadly refer us back, time and again, to the substance of our form of life (in all its complexity and instability), for that is the only ground available for affirmation, criticism, or resignation.⁵⁰ David Cerbone nicely captures the wistfulness of this point: "In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein remarks that language 'is there—like our life' (§559), which I take to mean that ultimately there is nothing outside of our lives, nothing deeper or more secure, in terms of which they can be justified."⁵¹

Chantal Mouffe, in her essay in *The Legacy of Wittgenstein* discussing the relevance of Wittgenstein for a handful of the most pressing issues in contemporary political theory, points to the element of existential responsibility that this view seems to suggest. She writes: "A radical reading of Wittgenstein needs to emphasize—in the way Cavell does in his critique of Rawls—that bringing a conversation to a close is always a personal choice, a *decision* which cannot be simply presented as mere application of procedures and justified as the only move that we could make in those circumstances and that we should never refuse bearing responsibility for our decisions by invoking the commands of general rules or principles."⁵²

What can Wittgenstein teach us about how to live? That we have no other option than to be who we are, to change as who we have been no longer satisfies or makes sense to us, and to live with the consequences. It is an austere vision, though not a cruel or hopeless one, and the essays in the two volumes under review help us to understand and grapple with it.

49. Linda M.G. Zerilli, "Doing Without Knowing: Feminism's Politics of the Ordinary," in *The Grammar of Politics*, 129-48.

50. I explore this question in greater depth in my recent doctoral dissertation, *Living Plurality: Contextualism and Politics* (Johns Hopkins University).

51. Cerbone, "Limits of Conservatism," 59.

52. Chantal Mouffe, "Wittgenstein and the ethos of democracy," in *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*, 137-38.