Of which we cannot speak: philosophy and the humanities

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Debatte: Die Zukunft der Qualitätsmedien

Mit Beiträgen von
Johanna Bergann, Christoph Engemann, Wolfgang Hagen, Jochen Hörisch, Bruno Latour, Pierre Legendre, Michael Niehaus, Patricia Pisters, David N. Rodowick, Fabian Steinhauer, Cornelia Vismann, Eyal Weizman
Of which we cannot speak ...

Philosophy and the humanities

D. N. Rodowick

Philosophy and the humanities have not found much common ground for conversation in theory. In a recent essay, An Elegy for Theory, I examined the debate between philosophy and theory from the point of view of competing epistemological stakes. From the analytic and cognitivist point of view, Theory stands accused of «epistemological atheism» and is wrested from the Continent to be returned semantically to the shores of science and the terrain of British and American analytical philosophy. Then there is another strain of philosophy, influenced by the later Wittgenstein, that distinguishes philosophy from science by renouncing theory or leaving it to science.¹

I want to suggest that the late Wittgenstein takes this argument in a similar but different direction, however, one that also questions «theory» but as a way of restoring a dialogue between philosophy and the humanities. I read Wittgenstein as less concerned with the epistemological perfectability of philosophical language than with reclaiming philosophy's ancient task of theoria. To recover a sense of the specificity of philosophy, both with respect to Theory and to the reasoning protocols of the natural sciences, Wittgenstein proposed a philosophical anthropology located in the sui generis character of human understanding. In the recent history of philosophy, important figures, though few in number, have called implicitly or explicitly for such a dialogue between philosophy and the humanities, the most forceful examples being Georg Henrik von Wright, P. M. S. Hacker, Charles Taylor, Richard Rorty, and Stanley Cavell. Each of these thinkers takes inspiration from the ways the later Wittgenstein aimed his Philosophical Investigations not at the quest for certainty, so characteristic of the history of analytic philosophy, but rather, as ways for returning philosophy to questions of human understanding and interpretation through ethical questioning.

In my book, An Elegy for Theory, I suggest that the humanities and philosophy may find new common ground in reframing, reasserting, or revaluing philosophy's primordial concern with ethics, or rather, with theoria as a practice of philosophy driven by ethical dissatisfaction and existential crisis. In its most ancient and fundamental forms philosophical expression is not only discursive, but also finds itself crafted as a life in a process that is open-ended and unfinished. Philosophia asks of the theist a conversion of being driven by the desire to be and to live in a new way in tune with a changed conception of the world. Therefore, philosophy is lived or presents itself in a life before it is spoken or written. Or rather, it cannot be spoken or written in the absence of a desire for change and the on-going execution of an existential choice. Call this the perfectionist strain of philosophy, so important to Stanley Cavell's later writings, which - as discourse and existential choice, both in a state of change fueled by dissatisfaction with one's self and the world - reaches for a state of knowledge that can never be fully attained.

A similar experience of ethical dissatisfaction permeates virtually all of Wittgenstein's writings after the Tractatus. Usually this ethical dissatisfaction is expressed in the acknowledgment that we are all subject to grammatical confusion, and that the only way to free ourselves for other steps toward thinking is through an instinctive revolt against the conceptual constraints that bind us, which in turn leads to something like a wholesale rearrangement of our language - that is, of the conceptual and expressive repertoires available for our interpretations and our self-descriptions and self-assessments. Richard Rorty calls this process recontextualization or learning a new language; Charles Taylor characterizes it as transformation under a new concept. In either case the path towards knowledge requires a reflexive turn through assessments of the terms for self-knowledge in which critical evaluations of ways of knowing are linked to the preservation or transformation of a mode of existence or form of life. If the politics and epistemology of Theory have been subject to much soul searching and epistemological critique, it is important nonetheless to find and retain in theory the distant echo of its connection to philosophy, or to theoria, as restoring an ethical dimension to epistemological self-examination. As Wittgenstein tried to teach us, what we need after theory is not science, but a renewed dialogue between philosophy and the humanities wherein both refashion themselves in original ways.

Georg Henrik von Wright was among the first philosophers to recognize this link between philosophy and the humanities through a renewed concept of ethics. Von Wright is a fascinating thinker, not only as one of Wittgenstein's most devoted students, but also as a key figure in the history of logic and twentieth century analytic philosophy who, like Wittgenstein, in the course of his long career suffered an ethical crisis that led him to reassess and transform his conception of philosophy. In his late collection of texts, The Tree of Knowledge and Other Essays, von Wright writes movingly of his disappointment with the overreaching ambitions of behaviorism, positivism, and logical positivism that ultimately failed, on one hand, to make of philosophy an epistemological handmaiden to science, and on the other, to provide a secure or even satisfactory philosophical foundation for the humanities. No one, I think, would consider von Wright an epistemological atheist. Yet, he insists that two general problems frame the failures of twentieth century philosophy, especially with respect to the humanities. One has to do with what von Wright calls the conceptual poverty of science, or the inappropriate extension of the methods and attitudes of the natural sciences to domains where they do not apply; the other problem arises from the value vacuum produced by this attitude. The conceptual poverty produced by an excessive concern with epistemology is fueled by an unwavering commitment to the legacies of positivism that inform all the varieties of scientism in theory, whether in formalism, structuralism, cognitivism, or logic, but also with their common inclination to make of language or expression an instrument of thought and analysis. This attitude, so characteristic of logical positivism, expresses the desire of logic progressively to reduce language in hopes of making it the ground for certainty and a perfect instrument of thought.

Throughout the essays collected in The Tree of Knowledge, whose original dates of publication range from 1947 to 1991, von Wright links the history of twentieth century analytic philosophy to an ever-widening and deepening instrumentalization of language and thought fueled by the steadily increasing prestige of science and technology in the twentieth century. The form of rational thought which I used to regard as the highest in our culture, von Wright explains, was becoming increasingly problematic because of the repercussions it had on life as a whole.  

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2 In The Big Typescript, Wittgenstein writes: The human being are deeply imbedded in philosophical, i.e. grammatical confusions. Freeing them from these presupposes tearing them away from the enormous number of connecting links that hold them fast. A sort of rearrangement of the whole of their language is needed. (Man muss Sozusagen eine ganze Sprache umgruppieren.) - But of course that language has developed the way it has because human beings are felt - and still feel - inclined to think that way. So the tearing away will succeed only with those in whose life there already is an instinctive revolt against the language in question and not with those whose instinct is for the very herd which created that language as its proper expression. Cited in Georg Henrik von Wright's translation in: The Tree of Knowledge and Other Essays, Leiden 1991, p. 97.


Throughout his book von Wright is calling for a complete reassessment of the terms or grammar of a certain concept of rationality, which has led not only to the domination of culture by technology and science, but also to a miscomprehension and devaluation of culture in its human dimensions of invention and expressivity.

This is why von Wright seeks a new valuation of the humanities, and a new emphasis on philosophy’s diagnostic and critical role for contemporary culture. Taking inspiration from the late Wittgenstein, a philosophy of the humanities would be concerned with the analysis of conceptual structures in everyday discourse and thinking that relate to human actions, norms, and valuations. In its many variants, the ideology of positivism was driven by a utopian vision of liberal democratic consensus wherein perfect understanding and communication could be progressively achieved through logical refinements of language. But Wittgenstein presents a very different vision of the embeddedness of human life in language and culture, one which enables possibilities for community and creation, but which also divides and separates us into discordant webs of beliefs and destructive attitudes leading to doubt, confusion, and uncertainty. The conceptual poverty of instrumental rationality relates not only to the scarcity of concepts, as malformed or inapplicable to our current needs, but also to their ethical poverty, or their incapacity or disinterest in presenting useful frameworks for defining, interpreting, understanding, evaluating, and passing through or beyond the dilemmas that block us from a better life. Like Nietzsche, and sometimes Wittgenstein, von Wright appeals to philosophy as a diagnosis of values, which is another way of understanding Richard Rorty’s comparable appeal in Inquiry as recontextualization for rebalancing the ontological-methodechical mode of philosophy with an ethico-political one. The instrumental rationality of science and logic considers itself exempt from moral reasoning and evaluation. To question instrumental rationality does not mean ignoring or rejecting the enormous achievements of modern science, but rather to counterbalance them with a critical rationality that acknowledges and investigates the value of the human striving for knowledge as a form or way of life, i.e., as a striving to know and understand for the sake of knowing and understanding in themselves and for no other purposes. This is a different vision for the evaluation of progress in philosophy, which is less concerned with adding to our stock of knowledge, as if laying bricks to complete an evermore complex and unassailable structure, than with continually turning the earth and surveying the terrain that nourishes thinking and makes it possible. Or as Wittgenstein put it in 1930: ‘I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as having a perspicuous view of the foundation of possible buildings. So I am not

aiming at the same target as the scientists and my way of thinking is different from theirs.’

What can be said, then, about the province of a philosophy of or for the humanities? At the conclusion to the Tractatus, Wittgenstein famously asserted that: ‘What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.’ Often bypassed is the preceding statement: ‘My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless [unsinnig], when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.’ Often taken as an admonition to remain silent in the face of what propositional logic cannot express or contain, Wittgenstein’s later philosophical investigations give evidence of the importance to philosophy of those domains of experience that are unsinnlich – non-sensical, or perhaps, contrary to ordinary or common sense – where no final consensus can be achieved nor one single standard of rationality apply; they are ‘super-natural’ (though not irrational) in the sense that instrumental rationality can neither account for their conditions of sense, their form or reasoning, nor their value to us. Most prominently, these are domains of aesthetic or ethical experience where understanding is grasped, intuited, or brought close to intelligibility through insight before it can be clearly expressed, much less linguistically encapsulated.

Philosophy’s inheritance from logical positivism in the twentieth century was twofold. One was the desire to exclude from philosophy unanswerable questions of ethics and aesthetics, or at least to reframe them in potentially more limited ways. The other was the desire to make philosophy disappear into science. These two tendencies are related in that what excludes questions of art or ethics, and what makes philosophy disappear into science, is the commitment to models of explanation that are primarily causal, empirically verifiable, and subsumable to universally applicable general or covering laws. The last line of the Tractatus meant to indicate that these unanswerable questions may well be the most central concerns of philosophical investigation, and the remainder of Wittgenstein’s philosophical life was devoted to finding and giving reasons for why this may be so.

In the Lecture on Ethics, prepared for delivery in Cambridge sometime between September 1929 and December 1930 though unpublished in his lifetime, Wittgen-
stein suggests that final and conclusive agreements on such questions cannot be hoped for. But this does not mean that ethical or aesthetic experiences are incom- municable or incomprehensible; hence Wittgenstein’s long fascination with inter-
mediate and impure cases as occasions for investigating these experiences philo-
sopherically, though often indirectly. Ethical and aesthetic judgments present cases
where humanity expresses its urge to run up against the limits of language. The
failure to find an adequate concept or expression may indeed lead us to silence,
but it is just as likely to produce in series a variety of different statements or forms
of expression, all of which fail to convey these experiences adequately to ourselves
or to others, but which nonetheless bring forth the blurred outlines of the experi-
ence in our repeated attempts to convey it, like lines in a sketch that create the
impression of a picture or idea as compelling as it is incomplete. (A thinker is very
much like a draughtsman whose aim it is to represent all the interrelations between
things, writes Wittgenstein in 1930.)⁸ There are thus no pure or final cases, but
only intermediate ones. But through the assembly of related intermediate cases
and perspicuous grammatical investigation, a latent image develops that nowhere
lies in the expressions themselves, but rather emerges in patterns of similarity
perceived among or between the expressions so produced.

Consider these images or features expressions, then. But what we want to
communicate, convey, apprehend, or understand lies nowhere in the image, but
rather is only graspable in a pattern of relationships that is itself neither pictured
nor expressed, yet becomes visible, as it were, if only in an intuited way. Witt-
genstein’s Lecture on Ethics⁹ offers by example procedures for developing or drawing
out these pictures through language in a process of comparing a number of more
or less synonymous expressions that struggle to assess the defining characteristics
of ethics. Though each expression differs slightly from the others, it is nonetheless
possible to assemble patterns of difference and commonality in ways similar to
the construction of a composite photograph. The effect thus produced is not a consen-
sual definition of ethics nor a complete understanding of the concept. Rather, as
Wittgenstein might put it later on, definitions and concepts of ethics are deployed
in a variety of language games in order to produce a pattern of family resemblances
where different but overlapping conceptual senses can be seen: so if you look
through the row of synonyms which I put before you, you will, I hope, be
able to see the characteristic features they all have in common and these are the
characteristic features of Ethics. This is what Wittgenstein might have meant
earlier in asserting that the world is seen correctly, not through propositions, but

only when propositional thought has been transcended, overcome, quelled, or
outgrown (überwinden). Moreover, the two fundamental domains where expression
and thought enter into such difficult but potentially expansive relationships are also
the two areas of primary concern to a philosophy of the humanities – aesthetics
and ethics.

In sorting through our expressive and conceptual difficulties in these domains,
Wittgenstein also advises that we distinguish the trivial or relative from the abso-
late sense of concepts. If as G. E. Moore put it, «Ethics is the general inquiry into
what is good, »good« might be characterized in a relative sense as progressively
approaching a certain predetermined standard. Judgments of relative value stand
close in form to scientific propositions in that they can be posed as statements of
fact adjudicated according to fairly quantitative measures. Potentially, they possess
a certain logical necessity and are open to procedures for reaching agreement
through the falsification and elimination of competing accounts. One could forge
a science of relative good perhaps, but it would say nothing about what concerns
us in judgments of absolute value, for «No state of affairs», Wittgenstein offers,
«has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge».¹⁰
In such situations, Wittgenstein continues, «I can only describe my feeling by the
metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on
Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the
world. Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of con-
taining and conveying meaning and sense, natural meaning and sense. Ethics, if
it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts …».¹¹

Make no mistake, Wittgenstein’s distinction between factual discourse and
«supernatural» concepts is neither a lapse into mysticism nor metaphysics. Or
rather, perhaps it is a recasting of metaphysics in a way that brings it down to earth,
that is, to the level of our quotidian experiences and statements. In any case, such
concepts can provoke no compelling agreement through logical necessity, mean-
ing they cannot be factually explained, but only conveyed and understood in
special ways wherein language may be both transcended and transformed, if it does
not instead lead us astray. Wittgenstein states that he can only offer a metaphor, or
perhaps an analogy, simile, or even allegory – all of which are forms wherein the
experience can only be indirectly related or which require the invention of new
forms of expression.

In Wittgenstein’s account, then, the apprehension of absolute value, whether
ethical or aesthetic, is less a matter of objective statements of fact than subject-
referring descriptions of experiences and beliefs, which are necessarily open and

⁸ Wittgenstein: Culture and Value (ibid. 6), p. 12c.
⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein: Lecture on Ethics, in: The Philosophical Review 74-1, January
1965, p. 5.
¹⁰ Ibid. p. 7
¹¹ Ibid.
contingent, and which themselves gesture towards ineffable or inexpressible experiences. Wittgenstein says that his own best way of describing the experience of absolute value is to say that when I have it I wonder at the existence of the world. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as how extraordinary that anything should exist or how extraordinary that the world should exist. The apprehension of absolute value, then, has a peculiar grammar, which is both discursive (how extraordinary that the world should exist), yet also unspeakable or which strains the capacities of sense. Expressions of absolute value are paradoxical, not only because they are descriptions of super-natural experience, but also because they are nonsensical. But if Wittgenstein here calls them nonsense, it is also important to account for how the character and meaning of the word are transformed. These semantic transformations tend in several directions. From one point of view it is nonsense to wonder at the existence of the world because we cannot imagine the world as not existing; there is a certain ineluctable self-evidence to existence. But this is not to say that we have lapsed into tautology or have thus disarmed and dispelled the experience, for to question these experiences skeptically is no more or less sensible than questioning why we have the human capacity to wonder or imagine. We will inevitably undergo these experiences and entertain these questions — they are characteristics or potentials of human experience that are best investigated by other means.

Another point of view notes that such experiences never take the form of factual or propositional statements, but rather are most often expressed in the form of similes or allegories. The paradox has now been compounded. Its domain of reference is both self-evident (I cannot imagine the world as not existing) and supernatural (I wonder at the existence of the world), and additionally it eludes ostensive definition — all descriptions of the experience must approach it indirectly or at a tangent. From a logical point of view such experiences are disturbing because as experiences they should have factual dimensions, and to leave them unaccounted for in scientific explanation only means that they have yet to be defined as scientific problems, or that the correct means of logical analysis of what we mean by ethical or aesthetic expressions has not yet been found. But this is not what Wittgenstein means by nonsense. And here we circle back to the final statements of the Tractatus where Wittgenstein implicitly distinguishes the power of language to describe from its powers of showing or demonstration. For when confronted with the argument that what should be searched for are correct logical analyses of absolute value, Wittgenstein responds:

I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, ab initio, on the ground of its significance. That is to say: I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.13

In a conversation held in the same time period of the preparation of the Lecture on Ethics, Friedrich Waismann reports similar thoughts, where Wittgenstein describes this human drive to run up or against the confining borders of language as characteristically ethical: «This thrust against the limits of language is ethics ... In ethics, one constantly tries to say something that does not concern and can never concern the essence of the matter. It is a priori certain that, whatever definition one may give of the Good, it is always a misunderstanding to suppose that the formulation corresponds to what one really means. (Moore). But the tendency, the thrust, points to something.»14

Humanity feels compelled to run along or against the frontiers of language. In other words, we struggle constantly against the confinement of thought in or by language. And if this struggle is ethical, it is less about achieving a consistent or universal definition of the Good or the beautiful, than expressing a desire to transform the terms of our existence. Moreover, if this drive «points to something», the experience is assumed to be real or significant, and not something illusory or irrational. Ethics is a matter of deep concern for philosophy, then, even if it cannot be expressed in the form of a question and there is no answer to it. At the same time, for Wittgenstein philosophy has no resources for investigating these experiences apart from those which can be applied to and through language and logical propositions. What Cavell, Taylor, or Rorty add to Wittgenstein, then, are strong arguments for reconsidering this drive. Rather than understanding it as examining our confinements in language and attempting to describe and correct lapses in

12 Ibid. p. 8.

13 Ibid. pp. 11–12.

It is not just human beings who possess the ability to think and learn. We are all capable of learning new things, but it is important to understand how our brains work and how we can optimize our learning processes. By understanding the principles of learning and memory, we can improve our ability to retain information and make better decisions in life. This involves understanding the role of the brain in learning and memory, as well as the importance of regular exercise and a healthy lifestyle in maintaining cognitive function. By incorporating these strategies into our daily routines, we can improve our ability to learn and remember new information.
philosophy's excessive concern with epistemology and knowledge of objects rather than persons. Our intellectual problems, Cavell suggests, are set by the very success of instrumental knowledge, that is, by the plain fact that the measures which soak up knowledge of the world leave us dryly ignorant of ourseves (68).  

Along these lines, Cavell approaches Wittgenstein in a deeply original way that demonstrates how Wittgenstein's new categories of criticism are generated through the grammatical style of the *Investigations* itself, which endeavors not to teach or to convince by saying or writing, but to *show* or picture practices of grammatical investigation and critique. This is a lesson that often passes in silence through seeing, above, below, or beyond words. In a move that brings us back full circle to an account of ancient philosophy as driven by an ethical disquiet that demands a changed conception of both self and world where knowledge and self-knowledge advance through one another, Cavell concludes his essay with a convincing account of how the style of the *Investigations* displays all the hallmarks of a grammar of confession. The question here is not understanding what Wittgenstein writes, but rather to immerse oneself critically and imaginatively in the how of his practice, gradually approaching its method or methods through its own suggested techniques of perspicuous description, connective analysis, and the pursuit of intermediate cases. In a deeply original move, Wittgenstein recasts confession as dialogue, especially an ethical dialogue with one's self. Thus the grammatical form of the *Investigations* exhibit.

"what serious confessions must: the full acknowledgment of temptation (I want to say ...; I feel like saying ...; Here the urge is strong ...) and a willingness to correct them and give them up (In the everyday use ...; I impose a requirement which does not meet my real need). (The voice of temptation and the voice of correctness are the antagonists in Wittgenstein's dialogues.) In confessing you do not explain or justify, but describe how it is with you. And confession, unlike dogma, is not to be believed but tested, and accepted or rejected. Nor is it the occasion for accusation, except of yourself, and by implication those who find themselves in you. There is exhortation (Do not say: There must be something common ... but look and see ..., (§ 66)) not to believe, but to self-scrutiny. And that is why there is virtually nothing in the *Investigations* which we should ordinarily call reasoning; Wittgenstein asserts nothing which could be proved, for what he asserts is either obvious (§ 1.26) - whether true or false - or else concerned with what conviction, whether by proof or evidence or authority, would consist in. ... Belief is not enough. Either the suggestion penetrates past assessment and becomes part of the sensibility from which assessment proceeds, or it is philosophically useless."  

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17 Ibid. p. 68.
18 Ibid. p. 71.
stein or Cavell to recover or relearn philosophy's ancient practice of *theoria* for our own time as something of central concern to the humanities.

Philosophical investigation differs from the logical quest for certainty, and in turn, as von Wright insisted: «The phenomena which the humanities study have features of their own which distinguish them logically from the typical objects of study in the natural sciences. A primary task of a philosophy of the humanities is to try to capture and do justice to those features.» To those who want truth from philosophy, or at least the proper conditions for truth telling, this turn in philosophy is scandalous for at least two reasons. Here the quest to enlarge our powers of reasoning takes place less through adding progressively to our knowledge of the external world than in examining the capacities and limits of human reason itself as expressed in its forms of communication and cultural practices, whose failures are as compelling as their successes. And further, strategies for enlarging our capacity to interpret and to understand necessarily require a reflexive turn as acts of self-interpretation where problems of knowing are inextricably intertwined with questions of import and value.

For better or worse, recourse to super-natural and non-sensical expressions may simply be a central fact of human existence. Moreover, acts of interpretation and evaluation are unavoidable in any mode of inquiry we undertake, whether as scientists or humanists. Interpretation is integral to sense-making and value-assessing in all its varieties, and interpretive acts also frequently produce acts of creation, thus producing new situations and frameworks for understanding. In such cases, there is both a transformation of the conceptual contexts in which inquiry and understanding take place, and also a subjective transformation of the interpreting agents. In this perspective, there is no separation of an object from a subject of knowledge, and thus the ascription or creation of sense will also involve a corresponding self-interpretation and transformation. Such arguments are aimed at preserving a space for the humanities in the face of an ever-expanding instrumental and technological reason. But they also profoundly challenge any strict division separating the humanities and the sciences. The focal point of a philosophy of the humanities, then, is to assert and evaluate the place, function, and importance of the human subject with respect to these activities of interpretation, creation, inquiry, and understanding.

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