

# When Are Ideologies Irreconcilable? Case Studies in Diachronic Anthropology

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## I. Wittgenstein's Method

Wittgenstein's concern to emphasize the natural history of concepts and human activities is well-known. This concern often leads him to describe scenarios that constitute a context in which to consider the role of some concept or activity. Through these thought-experiments we are brought to see the social and temporal dimensions of what might otherwise seem private, individual, or overly-simple phenomena. According to Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein 'used to say that what we might call "the anthropological method" had proved quite fruitful in philosophy: that is, imagining "a tribe among whom it is carried on in this way: . . .".'<sup>1</sup>

As with cases in moral philosophy, our intuitions are elicited and compared with our theoretical judgements. For some, e.g., utilitarians, this procedure loosens the hold of unfortunate intuitions; for others it loosens the hold of mistaken theories. In moral philosophy there is the danger that cases are described in ways that conceal relevant complexities, just as scientific thought-experiments may over-simplify or mislead. One needs to ask similar questions about Wittgenstein's scenarios.

Wittgenstein readily acknowledges the incompleteness or over-simplification of some of his scenarios, but this leaves it open to further discussion and investigation whether the incompletenesses are problematic for the issues at hand or not. In any case I think the value of the scenarios is unquestionable – if only for the further reflection that they instigate.

In this paper I will begin with certain scenarios that Wittgenstein describes in *On Certainty*. He uses these as thought-experiments to support certain claims. I think they require fuller discussion.

1. Rhees, 1965, p. 25.

II. Some Scenarios in *On Certainty*

In his 'Defence of Common Sense' G.E. Moore claims to know with certainty a number of things. One of these is that 'the earth has existed for many years before my body was born'. Another is that each human being has 'been, at every moment of its life after birth, either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth'.<sup>2</sup> In response to these claims Wittgenstein writes, in *On Certainty* (OC):

§92. May someone have telling grounds for believing that the earth has only existed for a short time, say since his own birth? – Suppose he had always been told that, – would he have any good reason to doubt it? . . . why should not a king be brought up in the belief that the world began with him? And if Moore and this king were to meet and discuss, could Moore really prove his belief to be the right one? I do not say that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way.

§262. I can imagine a man who had grown up in quite special circumstances and had been taught that the earth came into being 50 years ago, and therefore believed this. We might instruct him: the earth has long . . . etc. – We should be trying to give him our picture of the world.

This would happen through a kind of persuasion.

§106. . . . 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), and who indeed grant that there are no ordinary means of climbing up to it or flying there? . . .

§264. I could imagine Moore being captured by a wild tribe, and their expressing the suspicion that he has come from somewhere between the earth and the moon. Moore tells them that he knows etc. but he can't give them the grounds for his certainty, because they have fantastic ideas of human ability to fly and know nothing about physics. . . .

What is supposed to be the problem in these cases? Presumably the tribe participates in a different language game from Moore, or lives a different form of life [*Lebensform* – translated by Rhees as 'way of living'<sup>3</sup>], or has a different world-picture [*Weltbild*]. I don't wish to worry about this particular matter of terminology – in fact I wish to abstract from Wittgenstein's terminology altogether and describe

2. Moore, p. 33.

3. See pp. 10 and 15 of TS 226 (Rhees's draft English translation of Part I of the *Philosophical Investigations*, with Wittgenstein's comments, 1939).

the situation as one in which the tribe and Moore hold different ideologies. The problem then is when, or in what sense, ideologies are irreconcilable. I take this to be a general philosophical problem about mutual incomprehension – with considerable political and social implications – for which Wittgenstein’s remarks may have relevance.

### III. Wittgenstein’s Position

Wittgenstein is claiming that in the scenarios described the differences between Moore and the tribe cannot be resolved by proof or by giving grounds. Other things may be possible, such as persuasion (though he must mean non-rational persuasion) or conversion, but these would presumably be based on temptation or force.<sup>4</sup> In any case, he wants us to think the prospects for reconciliation are dim and the prospects for resolution are worrisome.

Though Wittgenstein only specifically addresses these scenarios, his remarks are often interpreted as having a wider application to circumstances of disagreements between different ethical systems, or between science and religion.<sup>5</sup>

### IV. Some Problems

These scenarios contain two simplifications: The encounter between Moore and the tribe is *brief* and it is *didactic*. Wittgenstein wonders what would happen ‘if Moore and this king were to meet and discuss’: ‘What reply could [he] make to the adults of a tribe . . .?’ At best ‘[He] might instruct him.’ (Though Wittgenstein did not intend it, the encounter between Moore and the tribe is not much different from the encounter between a professor and a class of students. We talk and debate, for perhaps 45 hours spread out over three months, in a classroom.)

If this is how we imagine the encounter, it is no wonder that we tend to be pessimistic about what can be accomplished, short of per-

4. Wittgenstein uses the term ‘persuasion’ with a negative connotation at OC §§612 and 669; but in other contexts it seems to have a more positive connotation, as in the 1938 lectures on aesthetics (Barrett, pp. 27–8).

5. See, e.g., Bambrough, 1991; and Rhees, 1965, pp. 22–24.

suasion. I am surprised that Wittgenstein seemed to rest content with these over-simplifications. The prospects for rational reconciliation should not be shortchanged by them.

Suppose there are two principles that seem to be in conflict. To say they are irreconcilable is to say that *there is no* acceptable interpretation or extension of their concepts that will bring them into conformity with one another. But negative existentials are notoriously difficult to establish. And the difficulty is exacerbated by Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations: What constitutes a legitimate interpretation of a rule is not determined by the rule itself, but by the rule as it is practiced by a community through time. Thus any statement about irreconcilability is a prediction about the future, as well as a statement about the present. And furthermore, how the community practices the rule through time depends in part on what influences there are, perhaps from other communities. Thus the prospect for reconciliation between principles depends on the nature of the interaction between those who hold them. If the interaction is brief and didactic, as it is between Moore and the tribe, the prospects are dim; if it is extensive – e.g., the two groups had to live together – the prospects might be brighter, though not necessarily so. Language games are 'there – like our life' (OC §559). But, like our life, they are changeable.

What we need to do, if we are interested in the reconcilability of ideologies, is engage in diachronic anthropology. We must look at what can happen over time when cultures are engaged with one another – not simply in debate, but in life. My point is not that success is ensured. In fact there are many apparent failures. My point is that there are unexpected successes, that depend on moving beyond the restrictive conditions that Wittgenstein accepts.

### V. *Praxis* over *Theoria*

The basis for moving beyond those scenarios is well-appreciated by Wittgenstein himself. The scenarios present the primary form of interaction as intellectual. Yet Wittgenstein was fond of citing Faust's discussion (Goethe's *Faust*, lines 1224–1237) of the opening line of the Gospel of St. John. Faust cannot accept that in the beginning was *das Wort* [the *logos*], nor that in the beginning was *der Sinn* [mind?]. Nor can he accept that in the beginning was *die Kraft*

[force<sup>6</sup>]. He finally accepts, what Wittgenstein at least twice quotes: *im Anfang war die Tat* [in the beginning was the deed] (OC §402).<sup>7</sup>

Wittgenstein is reminding us that the fundamental consideration in understanding human beings is not linguistic but behavioral. Thus we cannot afford to ignore the possibilities of living interaction, as Wittgenstein seems to do in these scenarios.

## VI. Marxism and Christianity

The subtitle of my paper promises case studies, and I will have space for only two. Many others are possible, and I hope that my description of these will provoke thought about others as well.

Until the 1960's hardly anyone would have disagreed that Marxism and Christianity were irreconcilable ideologies. Ruling Communist governments suppressed the Church and persecuted Christians, while the Papacy, which had tolerated Fascism, had no qualms about denouncing Communism at least a dozen times as well as excommunicating members of the Communist party.

De-Stalinization in the Soviet Union, beginning with the Twentieth Party Congress, and the papacy of John XXIII and his Vatican II were among the events that enabled Christians and Marxists to meet on a dialogical basis. Yet these dialogues were carried on as discussions at the level of international conferences, with little or no previous or on-going contact among the participants. They were theoretical exchanges concerning different systems of belief. And they centered in Europe.

But things were different in other parts of the world by the late 1960's and the 1970's. While visiting South America in 1971, and noting the 'recent fact' of 'a growing number of priests and Christians in general who have a definite participation in the process of liberation' Fidel Castro is reported to have said, half-jokingly, that he felt rather confused because 'theologians are becoming communists and communists are becoming theologians.'<sup>8</sup> Castro was noting the beginnings of a transformation in both politics and religion in Latin America caused by extreme political oppression and grave eco-

6. Here we see Goethe flirting with the views of Yoda and the Jedi masters!

7. See also 'Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness,' in *Philosophical Occasions*, p. 395; collected in *Culture and Value*, p. 31.

8. Quoted in Míguez Bonino, p. 15.

conomic hardship, and expressed in what came to be called Liberation Theology. This began with a proliferation of Christian base communities in which theology was experiential, communal and practical. The first official expression of this movement was at the 2nd General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Colombia, in the summer of 1968. *How* it can be that some people were committed to both Marxism and Christianity may not be so clear; *that* it was so, however, is a fact of history. In 1976 one of the leading liberation theologians wrote:

To bring together [the] vastly different presuppositions [of Marxism and Christianity] is the task to which I shall try to make a very small contribution. Our total experience as Latin American Christians convinces us that it is possible, indeed necessary, to establish these correlations. But it also convinces us that this will not happen mainly through theoretical discussion . . . but in actual historical engagement. Reflection must be placed in the service of such action, but it cannot be dispensed with nor its importance minimized. It must accompany the experience of success and failure, it must try to penetrate the nature of our practical dilemmas, frustrations and drawbacks in order to overcome them and it must temper and give consistence to our enthusiasm.<sup>9</sup>

Ideological reconciliation works best when and where there is a need for engagement between people, and not just a clash of disembodied ideas. The oppression of Latin America provided these conditions. Faith became not so much orthodoxy as orthopraxy.<sup>10</sup> As Marx wrote, in the 11th of his 'Theses on Feuerbach': 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.'

But engagement will lead to reconciliation only where those involved come to trust some of the same things. Wittgenstein writes (OC §509): 'I really want to say that a language game is only possible if one trusts something (I did not say "can trust something").' And I will add that a *common* language game is possibly only where people trust something in common. Trust is not developed by discussion but by life in common. (Of course it is not guaranteed by life in common.)<sup>11</sup>

9. Míguez Bonino, p. 8.

10. Cf. George Thomson's observation, concerning Wittgenstein's attitude to Marxism: 'He was opposed to it in theory, but supported it in practice' (cited in Monk, p. 343).

11. Though I am emphasizing how life in common can bring about reconciliation of apparent differences, it is also true that it can reveal deep differences that may have superficially appeared as similarities. Both phenomena occur over time in marriages.

Wittgenstein's scenarios don't tell us where Moore and the king will go once the discussion is over. If they go back home to their respective residences, as did the European Christians and Marxists of the 1960's, then nothing much can be expected to happen. If they have to live together and find they have need of one another, as did Latin Americans, then the prospects may change.

Of course the papacy tried to disown Liberation Theology, and this raises the question of whether it is a legitimate interpretation of Christianity. In a 1982 letter to the Nicaraguan bishops Pope John Paul II condemned the movement, and in his visit to Central America in 1983 called it an internal adversary. The papacy, however, is not the final arbiter of this issue, even if it thinks that it is. The deepest issue is whether the Holy Spirit was alive among the Marxist Christians of Latin America. Certainly those familiar with the base communities that espoused Liberation Theology did not doubt their faithfulness. Communist governments were more accommodating than some of the ecclesiastical structures, but whether that was pragmatic and disingenuous is open to question. The point is now moot from the Marxist side.

One of the reasons that rapprochement was possible between these two ideologies was that orthodoxy on both sides was not strictly defined and enforced. There was enough diversity within the communities guided by these ideologies that heresy in the eyes of some ('the faith is being eaten away from within'), was reinvigoration in the eyes of others ('these are authentic attempts to prevent the faith from becoming a historical relic and to keep it a living reality for here and now').

When Wittgenstein talks about rule-following in terms of what we find, or the community finds, it natural to go on doing, he is touching on, without plumbing, these depths. Certainly the issue often is who 'we' are; who is part of my 'community'. (E.g., who are the 'Christians' and the 'Marxists' when we wonder whether 'Christianity' and 'Marxism' can be reconciled?) When Moore and the king talk, Moore is not seen as part of a community at all, and the king, while part of a community in one sense, is not an ordinary part of that community. Neither is seen as beholden to any community, nor do any communities come into contact with one another.

Whether Liberation Theology shows that Marxism and Christianity are reconcilable is not, finally, my point. My point is that Liberation Theology raises the right kinds of questions for

thinking about the issues skirted in Wittgenstein's brief scenarios. It certainly shows the possibility of success, and ways for pursuing success, in cases that may have seemed hopeless. As Wittgenstein reminds himself and us: 'don't think, but look!' (PI §66).<sup>12</sup>

## VII. Wittgenstein as a Soldier

My second case study is a study in failure, and I think the failure is enlightening so far as understanding the limitations and pessimism of Wittgenstein's scenarios.

There were several times in Wittgenstein's life when he was more or less alone in dealing with an alien culture: going to *Realschule* for three years in Linz in his mid-teens; living in Norway at various times; serving in the Austro-Hungarian army for 5 years during World War I; working as a school teacher in several different villages in rural Austria for six years in the 1920's; living and teaching at Cambridge off and on from 1929 to 1947; and living in Ireland after his retirement.<sup>13</sup>

Wittgenstein lived through these experiences with different degrees of success. Life in Norway was apparently quite a success. Life in Cambridge had many fewer ups than downs. His experiences in the army and as a school teacher were nearly complete disasters, salvaged only by his own spiritual growth and occasionally finding a single friend to embrace. I think the experiences of those years were very formative for his later philosophy. In this case I think that the pessimism of his scenarios is in part an expression of his own inability to find mutual comprehension in these wilderness experiences. (Oddly, the community that plays such a central role in his philosophical thinking was altogether lacking in his own experience of life.) I will discuss only the war years here, but similar things can be said about the teaching years. Mainly what I wish to show, by quotations from his wartime notebooks, is this mutual incomprehension

12. In a fuller investigation we would need to look at what constitutes reconciliation, and at the various forms that reconciliation can take. Case studies are valuable when they keep us from being guided too much by our expectations about how these things (have to) happen.

13. Another example would have been living in the Soviet Union, if he had ended up moving there in the 1930's (Monk, p. 353).

and complete alienation that Wittgenstein theorizes about in his discussions of different forms of life or world-pictures.<sup>14</sup>

Beginning in August, 1914, Wittgenstein spent four months with a crew on board the ship *Goplana*. The bulk of the crew came from various subject Slavic nationalities.

MS 101, 10 August, 1914 (Monk, p. 114): After having been jeered at by the crew he wrote: 'It was terrible. If there is one thing I have found out it is this: in the whole crew there is not one decent person.'<sup>15</sup>

MS 101, 15 August, 1914 (Rhees, 1984, p. 196; Monk, p. 114): 'The ship's company is a band of pigs [*Saubande* – Monk: a bunch of delinquents]. Without enthusiasm for anything, unbelievably crude, stupid and malicious. . . . It will hardly be possible to communicate with people here.'

MS 101, 21 August, 1914 (Monk, p. 114; McGuinness, p. 215; & C&V, p. 1): '[The lieutenant] can have to do with the biggest scoundrels and be friendly without losing any of his dignity. When we hear a Chinaman talk we tend to take his speech for inarticulate gurgling. Someone who understands Chinese will recognize *language* in what he hears. Similarly I often cannot discern the *human being* in a man.'

MS 102, 9 November, 1914 (McGuinness, p. 215): 'What mean voices! You can hear all the viciousness of the world croaking and snarling in them. Meanness wherever I look. Not a *single* heart with feeling in it in sight!'

MS 102, 11 November, 1914 (McGuinness, p. 215): 'The worse the situation becomes, the cruder are the NCOs. Because they feel that they can give free rein to their meanness unchecked by the officers, who are now losing their heads and no longer exercise any control to keep things on the right path. Every word you hear now is a piece of abuse. Because there is not the slightest reward for decency anymore, so that people abandon even the small amount of it that may still be left to them. It is all extremely sad.'

14. Indeed, the experience and expectation of failure of being understood pervaded Wittgenstein's life. Cf. the reception of the *Tractatus* (letter to Russell, June 12, 1919), the reception of his talk to the Aristotelian Society and Mind Association (letter to Russell, July, 1929), and the reception of the *Investigations* ('Preface,' in PI, p. x). And more generally, cf. his early 1929 letter to Ramsey, his dream recorded on October 6, 1929 (MS 107, p. 153) and reported in Monk, p. 276, and his diary entry on July 28, 1947 (MS 135) reported in Monk, p. 516.

15. All of these entries were originally written in code in Wittgenstein's wartime notebooks. English translations can be found at the places indicated before each entry.

Wittgenstein sought impassivity and isolation in the face of bad relations with his fellow soldiers. He felt he needed to cut himself off from the rest of the crew.

MS 102, 10 December, 1914 (Monk, p. 120): He referred to the 'mass of scoundrels' whose company he had been forced to endure for four long months.

By 9 December, 1914 Wittgenstein was attached to a Garrison Workshop, which allowed some privacy.

MS 102, 27 January, 1915 (McGuinness, p. 230): 'Spent the evening with many officers in the cafe. Most of them behaved like pigs. I even drank a tiny bit more than was necessary.'

Wittgenstein transferred to a workshop train and more favorable conditions (about 15 August, 1915). On 21 March, 1916 Wittgenstein went to the front, and was in battle about 21 April–10 June.

MS 103, 27 April, 1916 (Rhees, 1984, p. 197; Monk, p. 139): 'The men of the unit with few exceptions hate me because I am a volunteer. So I am nearly always surrounded by people who hate me. And this is the one thing which I still do not know how to take. There are malicious and heartless people here. It is almost impossible to find a trace of humanity in them.'

MS 103, 6 May, 1916 (Rhees, 1984, p. 198): 'Understand people. Whenever you feel like hating them, try to understand them.'

MS 103, 8 May, 1916 (Rhees, 1984, p. 198): 'The people around me are not so much mean as *appallingly* limited. This makes it almost impossible to work with them, because they forever misunderstand one. These people are not stupid but limited. Within their circle they are smart enough. But they lack character, and thereby breadth. "A heart of true faith will understand all."'

After hearing about this onslaught of experiences, it is easy to imagine Wittgenstein (rather than Moore) as having been 'captured by a wild tribe, and their expressing the suspicion that he has come from somewhere between the earth and the moon. [Wittgenstein] tells them that he knows etc. but he can't give them the grounds for his certainty, because they have fantastic ideas of . . .' (OC §264).<sup>16</sup>

16. Wittgenstein's feeling here was aptly summarized by him in PI, Part II, p. 223: ' . . . one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find our feet with them [literally: We cannot find ourselves in them].'

Although Wittgenstein usually had to live and work with the other soldiers, and they had certain common purposes because of a common enemy, these factors had no tendency to relieve Wittgenstein's alienation. In fact he reinforced the alienation by separating himself as much as possible from the other soldiers. And if he found himself engaging with them on their terms, his superego immediately pronounced the rapprochement heretical ('I even drank a tiny bit more than was necessary' 27 January, 1915). In 1916 he tries for some understanding, if not engagement, but clearly fails.

I am not suggesting that Wittgenstein should have sought and found reconciliation with his military comrades. Perhaps they were too corrupt. My point is that the experience of alienation was so profound that he became indelibly pessimistic and incurious about the prospects for reconciliation, in ways that influenced his philosophizing.<sup>17</sup>

## VIII. Conclusion

In his last course of lectures Wittgenstein is reported by Malcolm to have made the following comments about his philosophical procedure:

What I give is the morphology of the use of an expression. I show that it has kinds of uses of which you had not dreamed. In philosophy one feels *forced* to look at a concept in a certain way. What I do is to suggest, or even invent, other ways of looking at it. I suggest possibilities of which you had not previously thought. You thought that there was one possibility, or only two at most. But I made you think of others. Furthermore, I made you see that it was absurd to expect the concept to conform to those narrow possibilities. Thus your mental cramp is relieved, and you are free to look around the field of use of the expression and to describe the different kinds of uses of it.<sup>18</sup>

I hope in this paper to have carried out the very procedure Wittgenstein describes – beginning with the scenarios he presented

17. Cf. McGuinness: 'These are the really formative years in a man's life [between the ages of 25 and 40] and in them his mood of prevailing pessimism became established. . . . ' p. 204.

18. Malcolm, p. 43.

and suggesting possibilities of interaction and development over time that he had not considered.

Riddle: When can ideologies be reconciled? Answer: When they cease to be considered as isolated belief systems, and come to be considered as aspects of potentially interacting lives.<sup>19</sup>

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19. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at a conference on 'Knowledge and Practice: Wittgenstein's Treatment of Knowledge in *On Certainty*,' University of Minnesota, October, 1996. This draft has benefited from the discussion that followed.