

James C. Klagge

The Puzzle of Goethe's Influence on Wittgenstein

Abstract: Wittgenstein was extensively influenced by Goethe, yet he specifically did not list Goethe as an influence. We examine this problem in connection with a single issue - the nature of causation and explanation: Goethe and Wittgenstein lived in different times that had different world-views (about, among other things, causation and explanation) pervading their life-contexts. How does one endorse a view that has a home in another life-context? Wittgenstein acknowledged but did not resolve this problem. He accepted Goethe's views, without knowing how to publicly endorse them in his times. This puzzle was created for Wittgenstein by his acceptance of crucial aspects of Spengler's philosophy of history.

Brian McGuinness characterized Goethe's place in Wittgenstein's thinking as follows:

To say what Ludwig admired in Goethe would almost be to say what he found remarkable or worthwhile in life, so many are the themes and attitudes from Goethe that recur in his thought.¹

Yet in 1931, when Wittgenstein set down a list of the people who influenced his thinking — Boltzmann, Hertz, Schopenhauer, Frege, Russell, Kraus, Loos, Weininger, Spengler, Sraffa — Goethe's name was conspicuously absent.²

¹ Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life, Young Ludwig (1889-1921)*, Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, 34-35.

² The list was published in: *Culture and Value*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, 19, and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998, 16; *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994, 41. At first the list contained only Frege, Russell, Spengler, and Sraffa. The others were then added. (The fact that he included Spengler on the list on the first go-around is almost as interesting to me as that he excluded Goethe altogether. Scrutiny of the secondary literature on Wittgenstein shows hardly any attention to how he might have been influenced by Spengler. I note Rudolf Haller as an exception: „Was Wittgenstein

In this paper I wish to look at just one aspect of this recurrence and possible influence — Goethe’s and Wittgenstein’s views of the nature of science and explanation. In an earlier paper I pointed out how Wittgenstein’s resistance to a mechanistic or mediative conception of causality may have drawn on Goethe’s own comments on scientific method.³ If science were done as Goethe tried to do it, scientists would not be obsessed with finding the mechanisms of causation. For example, Goethe writes:

Someday someone will write a pathology of experimental physics and bring to light all those swindles which subvert our reason, beguile our judgement and, what is worse, stand in the way of any practical progress. The phenomena must be freed once and for all from their grim torture chamber of empiricism, mechanism, and dogmatism; they must be brought before the jury of men’s common sense.⁴

And in a 1938 lecture Wittgenstein was noted as saying:

Today, in case we actually discovered two seeds which we could not distinguish, but one produced a poppy and the other a rose, we should look frantically for a difference. — But in other circumstances we might give this up — give up looking for a difference. This would be a tremendous thing to do — as great as recognizing indeterminacy. We would no longer *look* for the difference, and so we would no longer say there *must* be a difference.⁵

Though Wittgenstein hardly alludes to Goethe in this context,⁶ the similarities are clearly evident in Oswald Spengler, whose own views on science (and philosophy) are directly attributed to Goethe.⁷ So Spengler’s inclusion on the 1931 list perhaps functioned as a proxy for Goethe.

Influenced by Spengler?“, in: *Questions on Wittgenstein*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.)

³ „Wittgenstein on Non-Mediative Causality“, in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 37, October, 1999, esp. 665-667.

⁴ Goethe, one of the *Maxims and Reflections*, reprinted in: *Scientific Studies*, vol. 12, Douglas Miller, tr. and ed., Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1987, 309.

⁵ Klagge and Nordmann, ed., *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1993, 411.

⁶ See Goethe’s discussion of the double poppy (§80) and the proliferated rose (§103) in the *Metamorphosis of Plants*, reprinted in: *Scientific Studies*, vol. 12.

⁷ See Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West [Der Untergang des Abendlandes]*, New York: Alfred Knopf, vol. 1-1926; vol. 2-1928; and Munich: C. H.

But Spengler's influence on Wittgenstein may also explain why Goethe was *not* on the list. According to Spengler, history is a series of discrete eras that grow, flower, and deteriorate. Our own Western era is supposed to have begun around the year 1000 with the soaring vaults and spires of Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals, reached cultural maturity in the Baroque period of Bach, begun to decline with the Rococo refinements and daring philosophical speculation of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, and plunged into deterioration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. The maturity of an era, which Spengler called „culture“ [*Kultur*], was equated with organism and religion. The end of an era, which Spengler called „civilization“ [*Zivilisation*], was equated with mechanism and irreligion.⁸

Though the distinction between stages of growth and deterioration within an era was by no means clear cut, and strains of both stages might exist side-by-side, Wittgenstein felt he belonged to a stage of European culture that had vanished in the 1840's, or perhaps with the death of the composer Robert Schumann (1810-1856).⁹ Johann Wolfgang Goethe

Beck'scher Verlag, both volumes - 1927, (originally published 1918). This book, expanded to a second volume in 1922, and revised in 1923, became a best-seller in post-war Europe. The passages most concerned with science and explanation are the Introduction; Chapter IX: Soul-Image and Life-Feeling; and Chapter XI: Faustian and Apollonian Nature-Knowledge, all in volume 1; and Chapter IX: Problems of the Arabian Culture (C), in volume 2. Portions of the relevant passages are unreliably excerpted in the Oxford abridged edition. (The lengthy footnote near the end of the Introduction to volume 1 explicitly specifies Spengler's philosophical debt to Goethe.)

For a fuller discussion of Spengler's influence on Wittgenstein, especially Spengler's philosophy of history, see the paper : James C. Klagge, „Wittgenstein in Exile“, in: D.Z. Phillips, Macmillan, forthcoming ed., *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy*.

⁸ See, especially, Spengler, vol. 1, p. 353/447-8 (in the German edition): „Culture and Civilization — the living body of the soul and the mummy of it. For Western existence the distinction lies at about the year 1800 — on the one side of that frontier life in the fullness and sureness of itself, formed by growth from within, in one great uninterrupted evolution from Gothic childhood to Goethe and Napoleon, and on the other the autumnal, artificial rootless life of our great cities, under forms fashioned by the intellect. Culture and Civilization — the organism born of Mother earth, and the mechanism proceeding from hardened fabric.“

⁹ McGuinness, op. cit., 8; and also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 2 / 4 / 23. The passage in its original context (MS 107, 156-7, 10.10.29) has been

(1749-1832) was, for Wittgenstein, the culmination of that cultural stage. (Indeed, Spengler often referred to the modern Western-European era as „Faustian“, after Goethe’s character.¹⁰) Yet Wittgenstein lived, and knew himself to be living, in a time of civilization.¹¹

So the puzzle of Goethe’s influence on Wittgenstein comes from the difficulties of anachronism: What problems are involved in someone from one stage of an era (i.e., Wittgenstein, living in the civilization stage of the Western era) endorsing views from another stage (those of, say, Goethe, who lived in the cultural stage of that era)?

In some cases the difficulties may not be great. If there are such cases, they would be ones in which the views involve concepts that straddle and transcend the stages in which they occur. One might think of mathematical concepts here. But in his attempt to be comprehensive, Spengler claims even mathematics is affected. In those cases in which the views are themselves relevant to distinguishing between the stages within an era (in this case, organism vs. mechanism), the difficulties are greater.

Spengler’s theory of history proposed that history comprised eras that exhibited similar stages of development, but no particular progress or development occurred from one era to another. For Spengler history was structurally repetitive.

In this respect Spengler differed from Karl Marx, whose theory of history supposed that movement from one stage to the next was progressive, rather than repetitive. But Marx’s stage-theory of history is at least

published in *Wiener Ausgabe (Vienna Edition)* vol. 2, edited by Michael Nedo (Vienna and New York, Springer-Verlag, 1994), 91. Goethe clearly preceded this rough dividing line. All of those listed as influencing Wittgenstein clearly followed it, except for Schopenhauer (1788-1860), who straddled it. Spengler, in fact, represents Schopenhauer as being on this side of that rough divide (45 / 60, and Table I. „Contemporary“ Spiritual Forms, in the back of the English hardback edition of vol. 1 / inserted after the Introduction in the German edition).

¹⁰ See, especially, Spengler, vol. 1, p. 354/449, where he even associates the Faust of the First Part with (Western) culture, and Faust of the Second Part with (Western) civilization.

¹¹ See the Foreword to his *Philosophical Remarks*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975, and the Sketch for that Foreword published in *Culture and Value*, 6/8-9/29-30. As these passages indicate, the (Spenglerian) distinction between culture and civilization was taken quite seriously and accepted by Wittgenstein.

structurally comparable to Spengler's account of evolution within a given era, as it progressed through the earlier stages of culture, and eventually declined into the stage of civilization.¹² Both philosophers of history had the problem of how to discuss concepts that had a home in one stage in their application to or within other stages.

In the 1875 „Critique of the Gotha Program“, Marx lamented the misuse of „ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete verbal rubbish [...]“¹³ The danger carried over to the problem of concepts which would be understood in one way by a contemporary audience, while being meant in quite another way by the author.

Terms like „just“ and „unjust“ had, for Marx, at best a sense that was relativized to the stability of the mode of production of the stage to which they were applied. Marx argued against using the terms in a way that would allow or encourage the common assumption that they had a progressive meaning that could transcend their application to a given stage. And since contemporary audiences would automatically make this assumption, it was better not to use them at all. Such use encouraged the idea that moral critique, rather than economic development, would move history: If capitalism hasn't developed sufficiently, then despite a moralistic critique of its horrors, we can't (now) have a successful revolutionary transformation to communism. And, in keeping with his conception of justice, we can't (now) say that capitalism is unjust.¹⁴

One of the contrasts that Spengler thought characterized the difference between the culture and the civilization stages of the Western era was the contrast between organism and mechanism. It was part of the decline to

¹² At this level, neither is repetitive. Of course there is the difference that for Marx each new stage is progress toward the final stage of communism, while for Spengler the movement to the final stage of an era — civilization — is degeneration. But that difference is not relevant to this comparison.

¹³ Excerpts reprinted in: D. McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 569.

¹⁴ Of course there is a huge literature on this question — whether Marx did or could or should call capitalism „unjust“ — perhaps best summarized in Norman Geras, „The Controversy about Marx and Justice“, reprinted in *Marxist Theory*, ed. A. Callinicos, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. I focus here on the interpretation according to which he couldn't — to illustrate the parallel with Wittgenstein (in relation to Goethe).

civilization that causal relations would be conceived mechanistically, rather than organically. Goethe, who stood near the end of the cultural stage of our era, inveighed against Newton's mechanistic approach to the study of light, and more generally against the move away from viewing change from the perspective of the whole organism, and to viewing it from the perspective of the mechanics of the parts.

In fact, Spengler illustrated the contrast between these approaches by reference to Goethe. Spengler lamented that:

Goethe's warning: "Do not, I beg you, look for anything behind the phenomena. They are themselves their own lesson." had become incomprehensible to the century of Marx and Darwin.¹⁵

Spengler's contrast placed Marx on this side of the culture / civilization divide. And in many ways that may be appropriate. But on the specific point of the nature of explanation, Marx has seemed, at least to some modern commentators, at odds with the mechanistic viewpoint.

The issue arises in Marx when, for example, he purports to explain people's behavior by what their objective class interests are, without attention to what their personal interests might be. A classic illustration of this possible bifurcation of interests is a collective action situation, such as the tragedy of the commons, where it is in the interests of the community of shepherds to maintain the productivity of the common grazing area by not over-grazing, but it is in the interests of each individual shepherd to have his sheep graze as much as possible.¹⁶

Thus Marx often resorts to large-scale explanations without concern for what the small-scale mechanisms might be. For example, he thought Britain's rule over India was „but the unconscious tool of history“ in

¹⁵ Spengler, vol. 1, 156/202. The quotation from Goethe is among the *Maxims and Reflections*, included in the selection published in: Douglas Miller, tr. and ed., *Scientific Studies*, vol. 12, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987, 307.

¹⁶ Allen Buchanan's paper „Revolutionary Motivation and Rationality“, reprinted in: M. Cohen et al., eds., *Marx, Justice, and History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, makes the point that the proletariat may have an interest in revolting, though individual members of the proletariat may still be better off as free riders.

bringing about a progressive revolution in Asia.¹⁷ Modern commentators have called Marx's large-scale explanations „functional“ (or, „consequence“) explanations, and debated whether such functional explanations need grounding in individual mechanisms, in accord with what has come to be called „methodological individualism“. As a leading exponent of methodological individualism in the social sciences, Jon Elster, has insisted, „The mechanism need not be intentional design — but *some* mechanism must be provided if the explanation is to be taken seriously.“¹⁸

Marx was, in this respect, methodologically naïve — he didn't attend to the question of whether mechanisms could be set out. He was like Wittgenstein's naïve botanist (from the 1938 lecture quoted above), who wouldn't „frantically look“ for a mechanism.¹⁹ Thus, if there is a rough divide, as Spengler suggested, between the organismic explanation of culture, and the mechanistic explanation of civilization, Marx lay on the far side of the divide.

Wittgenstein, who lived clearly in the civilization stage of our era, but whose heart lay equally clearly in the culture stage, was in an awkward position when it came to expressing views on causation. He expressed them rather forcefully, but in a way that fit more comfortably in the

¹⁷ Karl Marx, „The British Rule in India“, reprinted in: *On Colonialism*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959, 44. Marx ends his analysis by quoting a favorite verse from Goethe. A number of examples of suspect explanations by Marx are given and discussed by Jon Elster in §2.4.2 of his book *Making Sense of Marx*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). In the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* Marx sums up his account of one of these kinds of explanations with: „This is the case with every organic whole“ (M. Nicolaus, tr., *Grundrisse*, New York: Vintage, 1973, 100).

¹⁸ Jon Elster, „Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory: The Case for Methodological Individualism“, reprinted in: *Marxist Theory*, 63. As Elster writes in *Making Sense of Marx*: „To explain is to provide a *mechanism*“, 5.

¹⁹ Marx's best-known contemporary analytic defender, G.A. Cohen, has acknowledged that „if the question *how* the functional explanations of historical materialism explain cannot even in principle be answered, then that would have lethal significance for historical materialism“ (in: „Reply to Elster on ‚Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory‘“, reprinted in: *Marxist Theory*, 98). But Cohen goes on to show how functional explanations might be justified by circumstantial evidence, without attention to mechanisms. Wittgenstein considers a similar circumstantial approach to causation, as I explain on p. 664 of my paper cited in note 3 *supra*.

culture era. The notorious remarks published in *Zettel* (§§608-613) include this (§610):

Why should there not be a psychological regularity to which *no* physiological regularity corresponds? If this upsets our concepts of causality then it is high time they were upset.²⁰

But while it might have been „high time“ they were upset from the organismic perspective of one settled in a culture, it was a mistake to think they could be „upset“ in the time of a mechanistic civilization. Wittgenstein’s critique of our concepts of causality was as anachronistic as a Marxist who claimed, from a moral point of view, that it was high time for capitalism to pass, but realized, from a material point of view, that it had not yet exhausted the prospects for developing the forces of production. The notes of Wittgenstein’s 1938 lecture from which I quoted earlier continue:

Now (today) we have every reason to say there must be a difference [between the seeds]. But we could imagine circumstances where we would break with this tradition.

The circumstances would presumably be those in which we would be guided by an organismic conception of causation, as Goethe was,²¹ rather than a mechanical one, as we are now.

The questions of where or when those circumstances might (yet) be realized were obliquely addressed by Wittgenstein. From Spengler’s perspective such cultural circumstances had become historically inaccessible to us: We were living in the decline of the Western era. They would be accessible only within the cultural stage of some other new or different era.

Wittgenstein once (in 1949) talked of writing for people one hundred years from now.²² And he looked toward the day when „a culture will

²⁰ These remarks were excerpted from a typescript compiled in 1947 and posthumously published as *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 1, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, 903ff.

²¹ Or a functional conception of explanation, as Marx (often) was.

²² Wittgenstein said to his friend Drury: „My thinking is not wanted in this present age, I have to swim so strongly against the tide. Perhaps in a hundred years people will really want what I am writing“ (R. Rhees, ed., *Recollections of*

arise out of this civilization.²³ At one point Spengler mentions the year 2000 as the end of the era.²⁴ If Wittgenstein took Spengler's prediction seriously, then 100 years from 1949 could have put his future readers in the culture of a new era in which they would not „say there *must* be a difference“.

In his own time Wittgenstein may have been attracted to Russia as being part of a different era from the West altogether. Spengler clearly viewed Russia as an incipient culture that was separate from the West, with Dostoyevsky as its prophet.²⁵ Yet when Wittgenstein experienced Russia first-hand it became clear that, whatever Spengler might have thought, it didn't fit the cultural bill.

We began with the puzzle that though Wittgenstein was extensively influenced by Goethe, he specifically did not list Goethe as an influence. We examined this problem in connection with a single issue — the nature of causation and explanation: Goethe and Wittgenstein lived at different times, with different world-views (about, among other things, causation and explanation) pervading their life-contexts. We end with a further puzzle: How does one endorse a view that has a home in another life-context? Wittgenstein acknowledged but did not resolve this problem. He accepted Goethe's views, without knowing how to publicly endorse them in his times. This puzzle was created for Wittgenstein by his acceptance of crucial aspects of Spengler's philosophy of history.

Wittgenstein, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, revised edition, 1984, 160).

²³ *Culture and Value*, 64/73/126 (1947).

²⁴ Spengler, vol. 1, 352/447. He seems to have been wrong.

²⁵ Spengler, vol. 2, 192-196/231-237, 278/339; and vol. 1, 16n / 21n.