

WITTGENSTEIN AS A CONSERVATIVE THINKER¹

1. INTRODUCTION

I want to argue that a good way to understand the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein is to see him as a conservative thinker or, better, that a good way to read the *Philosophical Investigations* is to see it as a document embodying the conservative thought style². It is very important to understand what is meant by the word 'conservative' here. I am going to take my definition of 'conservative thought' from the essay of that title written by the sociologist Karl Mannheim. It is to be found in his *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology* published in 1953.

I need to do three things. First, I must explain what Mannheim meant by the conservative thought style³. Second, I must produce evidence that Wittgenstein's later work fits the specifications of this style. Third, I must show the consequences of this fact and explore its implications. Before doing any of this, however, I should say something about the point and purpose of the entire enterprise. The question here is: why attempt such a 'stylistic' interpretation? The answer to this, and the justification for the exercise, lies in the sheer difficulty of understanding Wittgenstein without some guide, or template, or map. To avoid superficiality, any reader of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* needs to form an underlying hypothesis to identify what the work is all about. If we use terms taken from Wittgenstein himself, we need an overview of the whole if we are to know our way around its detailed parts, and if we are to see them in proper perspective. It is all too easy to latch onto isolated parts of the text and over-interpret them. A sense of the structure of the position is needed to keep things in proportion. So let me prepare the ground for the three steps of my argument by quickly looking at the general problem of understanding Wittgenstein.

2. UNDERSTANDING WITTGENSTEIN

Anyone who opens the pages of the *Investigations* can easily find out, to a certain degree, what the book is about. They will have no trouble grasping some of the general features of Wittgenstein's position. It will be apparent that his concern was with the nature of language and thought. He addressed the question of 'meaning', namely: what is it to mean something by our words and thoughts? It will be clear that, in general, he rejected the idea that the meaning of a word is the thing it stands for. It will also be obvious that he had no time for the theory that the meaning of a word is a mental picture or image that comes before our consciousness when we hear the word. His positive view was that, for a large class of cases, the meaning of a word is its *use* in a language (P.I. §43). 'Meaning is use' is the well-known slogan. Meaning is not simply outside us (in things) nor inside us (in our minds). It is somewhere in-between: but where? To answer this

question, and to provide a location for meaning, Wittgenstein directed us to what he called customs, practices, conventions, and institutions.

Wittgenstein can also be seen to have had something of a preoccupation with rules and rule-following. For example, he said that rule-following cannot, in the last analysis, be understood as a process of interpretation. To follow a rule by a process of interpretation means, in effect, to follow a rule by consulting another rule (i.e. the rule for interpreting the first rule). Rules for following rules leads us to an infinite regress, so he concluded that there must be a way of following a rule which is not an interpretation. Ultimately we follow rules *blindly* (P.I. §219), as he put it. This is a very striking metaphor and it appears to connect with his stress on the importance of customs, hence his statement in the *Investigations*:

To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions). (P.I. §199)

So much would be clear to anybody who simply opened the book and read. But something else would also be clear. The *Investigations* is no ordinary book: there are no chapters and no chapter headings, just a series of remarks and numbered paragraphs. The topics under discussion change without warning, and it is difficult to identify the premises and the conclusions of his arguments. In other words, the work lacks the standard format and rational organisation that we might well expect of a philosophical book. Wittgenstein said he did not want to break the natural flow of his thinking, or force it into channels that were imposed externally, rather than arising from the nature of the investigation itself. The result is that, very often, readers are puzzled because they do not know where the argument is going. So it is hardly surprising that different readers diverge, and diverge strongly, over the general direction of Wittgenstein's thinking. Let me list some of the divergent readings:

- (i) Some think Wittgenstein was putting forward a form of idealism. They detect echoes of Kant. Others deny that there is *any* idealist element in the work at all.
- (ii) Some see analogies with the work of David Hume and with Hume's scepticism. Others deny that there is any form of scepticism in Wittgenstein.
- (iii) Some see in Wittgenstein a form of behaviourism; others deny he was a behaviourist.
- (iv) Some see Wittgenstein as adopting a sociologically oriented view, while others insist that he was an individualist.

You can see what is happening. Wittgenstein's readers are – quite reasonably – trying to assimilate him to other known thinkers, and other known intellectual traditions. Admittedly, it is sometimes said that Wittgenstein was unique, and that he cannot be fitted into any existing categories or schools of thought, but this is a minority opinion. I shall stand with the majority. To understand Wittgenstein involves seeing the connections and analogies with existing traditions. The problem, of course, is to find the right comparison. I shall now introduce my