Parker alleges that Wittgensteinian presuppositions of essentialism and relativism obscure the role of social power in linguistic discourse. Not only is this claim self-contradictory, it is wrong in each of its component counts. Strands of essentialism in Wittgenstein’s early writings were skewered effectively in his own later philosophy. Although Parker is not alone in charging Wittgenstein with relativism, we argue that a careful reading of Wittgenstein’s work belies such a claim. This is because the meaning of a given language-game is fixed by patterns of ongoing social interaction among people who share a particular ‘form of life’. Against Parker, we show that Wittgenstein’s (anti-)philosophy is in fact largely congenial to Marx’s (anti-)philosophy, with both writers allied against the doctrines of individualism, subjectivism, mentalism, idealism and metaphysicalism. Although it may be true that Wittgenstein the person was relatively silent about issues of social and political power, Parker has failed to establish that Wittgensteinian metatheory is incompatible with the analysis of power in social discourse. In sum, we argue that Wittgenstein, like Marx, was a social materialist (rather than a social constructionist) whose writings articulate the foundations of mind and meaning in terms of concrete social practice.

The practical turn

While for centuries most theories of mind and behavior did more to mystify than to enlighten social and psychological functioning, Marx and Wittgenstein were committed to understanding human psychology and behavior in terms of their actual social and material circumstances. Although Marx was concerned largely with exercises of power that
develop within specific ‘modes of production’ and Wittgenstein was concerned largely with ‘language-games’ that develop within particular ‘forms of life’, both may be regarded as ‘social materialists’ who strove to de-mystify social and psychological explanation (Jost and Hardin, 1994). The unity of their approaches is evident in numerous passages such as the following:

(1) Where speculation ends – in real life – there real, positive science begins: the representation of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men. Empty talk about consciousness ceases, and real knowledge has to take its place. (Marx and Engels, 1846/1970: 48)

(2) One of the most dangerous ideas for a philosopher is, oddly enough, that we think with or in our heads... The idea of thinking as a process in the head in a completely enclosed space, gives him something occult. (Wittgenstein, 1967, §§605–606)

(3) The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. (Marx and Engels, 1846/1970: 47)

(4) Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning. (Wittgenstein, 1967, §173)

(5) the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations. (Marx, 1845/1975, Thesis VI)

(6) How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by sketching the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions is not what one man is doing now, an individual action, but the whole hurlyburly of human actions, the background against which we see any action. (Wittgenstein, 1967, §567)

(7) All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solutions in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. (Marx and Engels, 1846/1970, Thesis VIII)

Theoretical commitments such as these led both Marx and Wittgenstein to reject a number of interrelated doctrines that have long dominated philosophy and social science (see Jost, 1995), including all of