

“What has history to do with me?”

Timelessness, Time, and Historical Contingency in Wittgenstein

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I have been thinking about a question first posed by Hannah Pitkin some decades ago in her book on *Wittgenstein and Justice*.¹ She asked then what, if anything, Wittgenstein might have to contribute to our understanding of ourselves as political beings. Pitkin realized that her question would have no easy answer since Wittgenstein speaks nowhere about politics in his philosophical work and his occasional asides on the topic are entirely inconclusive. (Not much mileage is surely to be got from the conception of Wittgenstein as a “conservative thinker.”) It is true that he was deeply concerned with matters of ethics, as the end of the *Tractatus* and his “Lecture on Ethics” of 1929 make evident, and one might expect there to be a bridge from his ethical concerns to politics. But Wittgenstein’s ethics is singularly a-political in character; one can even call it anti-political- to use Nietzsche’s term for an actual aversion to politics.² In conversation Wittgenstein once provoked the politically minded Russell with the biblical word: “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul.” And saving one’s own soul, he said to Russell, turning the knife in the wound, “depended more on suffering and the power to bear it” than on any positive action. He was overwhelmed at the time by a quietist and thoroughly a-political sentiment voiced by a character in a popular Austrian play who felt that “no matter what happened in the world, nothing bad could happen to him.”³ That thought was to sustain him later in the battles of the First World War and ten years after the war. In one of

his personal diary entries from that time he speaks of his project of a “complete passivity,” of no resistance to the world around him “in order to leave the inner life undisturbed.” Again and again he repeated to himself the words of Tolstoy: “Man is powerless in his flesh but free through his spirit.”⁴ And when he delivered his “Lecture on Ethics” fifteen years later he still perceived the ethical dilemma as one of seeing the world and himself in a certain way rather than of active engagement in the world. In the *Tractatus* he had written before that of the will’s inability to alter the facts, its capacity only for giving the world as a whole a positive or negative meaning. The ultimate, ethical goal, he had concluded, was not intervention in the world in order to make it a different place but “to see the world aright.”⁵ Later on, in 1931, he remarked in a kindred spirit that “work in philosophy ... is really predominantly a working on oneself. On one’s own understanding (*Auffassung*). On how one sees things. (And what one demands from them.)”⁶ This deeply personal, “visionary” form of ethics appears to have little to do with social engagement and political action, with any desire to change the world.

I agree, nonetheless, with Pitkin that Wittgenstein has lessons to teach *us* when we set out to think about political matters. Those are to be found, however, not in any positive political views Wittgenstein may have entertained but in his thoughts on the diversity of language games and world pictures, on the multiple uses of language and the variability of what we call meaning, on the resemblance structure of concepts and on the web of family resemblances that social concepts exemplify, on the grounding of rules in regularity and practice, on the unsurveyability of the human form of life, and on the interconnectedness of the private and the public. Even Wittgenstein’s visionary conception of ethics may be of interest in this context by suggesting the corresponding possibility of a new visionary kind of politics. Most relevant is Wittgenstein’s insistence on the need to examine our most elementary philosophical concepts – those of philosophy, language, and meaning, etc. – since it motivates the complementary lesson that we must equally attend to our elementary political concepts – those of politics, power, conflict, decision, and deliberation, as well as those of democracy, justice, liberty, and equality – if we are to avoid the trap of ever more elaborate and ever more confused theorizing.⁷

A further thought is that political insight may be gained even from Wittgenstein's anti-political stance. As political theorists and philosophers we tend to consider only those with a positive interest in politics: statesmen, legislators, professional politicians, political organizers, activists, commentators and analysts. It never occurs to us that, however much they differ, they may be sharing a one-sided view of our political reality. The acknowledgement of a- and anti-political individuals and of a- and anti-political forms of thought throws thus a distinctive light on this reality. It highlights that being political is just one among various forms of human life. Eduard Spranger, from whom Wittgenstein most likely took the term "Lebensform," recognized this when he spoke of political man, the man of power, as instantiating only one possible form of life. Politics may appear all-consuming at times and, according to the politically engaged, calls on us constantly and persistently, but the anti-political individual evades its supposed demand in the name of holiness, personal perfection, or of science, art, philosophy, or simply of the wish for a quiet life. The presence of such individuals forces upon us the thought that Aristotle was wrong when he called us political by nature.⁸ But the politically engaged will, no doubt say that a-political individuals still find themselves in a political world – though perhaps without recognizing the validity of its demands. Was Wittgenstein not forced into war by circumstances beyond his control and later to become a British subject? Still, does the existence of anti-political individuals not allow us to conceive, at least, of the possibility of humanity freed from politics? That is, surely, the great anarchist hope. But with this possibility we face the question what contingent historical forces may have been responsible for the emergence of politics, what needs (real or imagined) politics serves, and to what extent politics may be a historical but entirely contingent human achievement or, alternatively, an equally contingent human burden.

My concern today is not with these questions but with a related one: the question what, if anything, Wittgenstein may have to contribute to our understanding of ourselves as *historical* beings.⁹ I will not even try to sort out the complex relation of politics and history; my assumption is simply that in order to think politically we must think of ourselves in terms of past, present, and future. For all forms of politics temporal categories are important and for most forms of politics historical ones as well.

But now it may seem that we are confronted with similar difficulties to the ones we faced when asking about Wittgenstein and politics. Wittgenstein certainly does not speak of historical matters in his major writings. He doesn't, for instance, examine the history of philosophy or look at other philosophers as historical figures. But on closer look we also notice some differences. His conversations and notebook entries reveal some historical interests; and his notes on Spengler's *Decline of the West* and on Frazer's *Golden Bough* show him to be grappling with some meta-historical questions. Most importantly, the course of his thinking seems to have taken him from a strictly anti-historical point of view to one that approaches a historical relativism.

The question of Wittgenstein's thought on these matters is of interest to me, among other things, because our engagement with Wittgenstein himself has turned so historical in recent decades. We have learned increasingly to look at Wittgenstein's writings in a historicist spirit. Brian McGuinness, Ray Monk, and others have argued for the bearing of Wittgenstein's biography on the interpretation of his work. We engage in this line of work, moreover, not as historians of ideas; but see ourselves still committed to Wittgenstein's way of thinking. Is it possible that we have slipped into a very different, "un-Wittgensteinian" form of thought, a hermeneutic-historicist sort of philosophizing that is worlds apart from Wittgenstein's?¹⁰ Can one genuinely be a Wittgensteinian historicist? And what would such a figure look like?

To explore these questions, I turn first to Wittgenstein's most resolutely anti-historicist thoughts. Then to a moment when time becomes a theme for him. And finally to the late period when a more historically minded thinking becomes manifest in his writings.

Sub specie aeterni

The anti-historicist strand in Wittgenstein's thinking expresses itself most forcefully in a notebook remark from 1916 that reads: "What has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world." (NB, p. 82) Those sentences did not make it into the *Tractatus* but this does not imply that Wittgenstein had changed his mind on the sentiment they expressed. He was, on the contrary, just as staunchly a- and anti-historical in the *Tractatus* as he had been two years earlier. While the book speaks, in its highly condensed fashion of all kinds of matters from the structure

of the world to the meaning of life, it has nothing whatever to say about the historical dimension of human existence. The word “history” makes, indeed, no appearance in the *Tractatus* and even the notion of time is mentioned only in passing. We get a vivid impression of Wittgenstein’s anti-historicism from the first two sentences of the *Tractatus* which say that “the world is everything that is the case” and that “the world is the totality of facts.” The “is” in them is evidently the same timeless, non-temporal “is” as in the mathematical proposition that “two is a prime number.” The facts of the *Tractatus* are timeless, even when they involve temporal events. And our sentences are timelessly true or false. Time and history do not enter into these considerations. And it does not matter here that the *Tractatus* ultimately rejects this entire set of claims as nonsensical for even that rejection is cast in a-historical terms. The only thing we can say is that the *Tractatus* implicitly tells a temporal (though quite a-historical) story when it concludes: “One must throw away these propositions, THEN one sees the world aright.” But this temporal moment is so little thematized that it has escaped almost all readers of the *Tractatus*.

I turn back then to Wittgenstein’s anti-historicist remark from 1916 in order to consider what exactly it may have meant for him. And here it is useful to separate the personal and from the philosophical. Wittgenstein had begun his notebook on August 9 of 1914, within days of the outbreak of the First World War, freshly enlisted as a soldier in the Austrian Army. It was meant to signal first of all his determination to continue, even in his new soldierly existence, the philosophical work he had been doing in the previous few years, to continue above all, in his own mind, the intricate and heated conversations he had had with Bertrand Russell, his mentor, friend, and intellectual other, from whom he was separated now as an enemy alien. The early pages of the notebook show him, indeed, to be reviewing issues and questions he had been mulling over with Russell long before anyone had ever contemplated the coming of war. We might thus read the 1916 remark initially as an expression of Wittgenstein’s determination not to be diverted from his philosophical work by the large course of history that had swept him up. But when Wittgenstein wrote those two extraordinary sentences he was, in fact, in a wholly different state of mind from the one he had been in at the beginning of the war. He had passed through the hell fire of battle and had been left convinced that he would never survive the war. As a result, he was also seeing his philosophical work now in a new light. His purpose was no longer to

continue Russell's work; he was grappling, instead, now with the most fundamental questions of life. Another possible meaning emerges thus from the 1916 remark – the thought that Wittgenstein was distancing himself in it from his own past, from Russell and his projects, and indeed from the entire history of philosophy and that he saw himself left to philosophize now entirely out of his own resources. Or should we interpret his words – a third possibility – even more existentially as an expression of Wittgenstein's certainty that he would not survive for long and that what counted now was not history but the moment? Was he saying, in the midst of a great historical upheaval, that the world had contracted for him to this moment, to this one experience that was now his own? We can, perhaps, hear echoes of such a thought in the *Tractatus* where we read that “eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.” (6.4311)

There is danger in reducing Wittgenstein's remark to an autobiographical footnote. Does it not also carry philosophical weight? Once again we need to ask again to what moment his words refer us. The answer might be: to Wittgenstein's pre-war years at Cambridge, when Russell had been committed to his logically “simple objects” and to the doctrine that apart from the immediate objects of experience everything else was a logical construction. Thus, a historical figure like Bismarck, the German Chancellor, so Russell later in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, had to be considered a logical fiction and presumably the same thing had to be said about history as a whole.¹¹ Is it possible then that Wittgenstein was speaking of *this* view when he wrote: “What has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world”? Some interpreters have, indeed, sought to read Wittgenstein as a sense-data theorist and this might explain those 1916 words. I doubt that this reading is correct. But this still leaves the possibility that Wittgenstein's remark may have been meant not as expressing a view he would endorse but as a reflection on sense-data metaphysics: as expressing the realization that for the sense-data theorist there is no history, that the only world there is for such a thinker is his own. Wittgenstein certainly understood this to be a tempting philosophical view. In his *Philosophical Remarks* he noted in 1930: “We [i.e., we as philosophers] are tempted to say: only the experience of the present moment has reality.” And this “appears to contain the last consequence of solipsism,”¹² for the solipsist will be drawn to saying that “a proposition like ‘Julius Caesar crossed the Alps’ merely describes my present mental state.” (PR, 56) But when Wittgenstein wrote this in 1930 he

was clear that this way of talking must be rejected since the proposition does evidently not describe a present mental state but “an event we believe happened ca. 2,000 years ago.”

It is also possible that Wittgenstein’s words refer us to views on logic which he may have shared with Russell during the pre-First World War period. In notes written for Russell in 1913, Wittgenstein had argued that philosophy consists of metaphysics and logic, of a metaphysics, that is, based on logic. And, in tune with Russell and, indeed, the tradition, Wittgenstein had conceived of logic as something timeless, sublime, and a-historical. We might read the 1916 remark then, also, as a declaration of the sublimity of logic.¹³ This is an old thought from the beginning of Greek philosophy. In its name Parmenides had argued that temporal change and, a fortiori, history is impossible since what is “is now, all at once, one, continuous.”¹⁴ Wittgenstein’s picture of logic may also have been derived from Frege’s who had argued forcefully that logic is concerned with timeless truths. The proposition that it is sunny today which appears to be variable in its truth-value is only shorthand for the timelessly true proposition that on April 12, 2013 it is sunny in Berkeley, California. Time is thus only a parameter in timelessly true propositions.

Wittgenstein’s 1916 remark may be understood still more broadly to be saying that the properly philosophical way to look at the world is not from a historical point of view but *sub specie aeternitatis*. This reading appears to be confirmed by another entry in the 1916 notebook which declares: “The usual way of looking at things sees matters as it were from the midst of them. The good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*.” (NB, p. 83) The phrase “*sub specie aeternitatis*,” we have been told, is originally Spinoza’s, but Wittgenstein is likely to have borrowed it from Schopenhauer’s treatise *The World as Will and Representation*. Schopenhauer argues there, extending a Kantian line of thought, that time is merely a form of intuition and not metaphysically real. He then goes on to quote Spinoza as saying: “The mind is eternal in so far as it conceives things *sub specie aeternitatis*.” And he adds to this that “the individual, as such, knows only particular things; the pure subject of knowledge knows only Ideas... The pure subject of knowledge and its correlate, the Idea, have passed out of all forms of the principle of sufficient reason... Time, place, the individual that knows and the individual that is known, have

no meaning for them.”¹⁵ Schopenhauer goes on to speak of the timeless and deep view of things as being also that of the mystics. All this chimes with Wittgenstein’s words in the *Tractatus*: “To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a – bounded – whole. Feeling the world as a bounded whole – it is this that is mystical.” (6.45) We may ask then whether it is this thought that he wished to express also in the question: “What has history to do with me?”

Wittgenstein’s words may also be understood as characteristic of that broad movement we know as high modernism. His whole book can, indeed, be seen in this way. In the sparseness of its prose, its conceptual austerity, its minimalism, its deliberate avoidance of classical models and historical references, and, most of all, in its singular preoccupation with the notions of structure and form, it may be thought of as the philosophical equivalent of Malevich’s suprematism, Mondrian’s calibrated grids, and Bauhaus architecture – like them a document of a moment in twentieth century culture that is still close to us and yet no longer quite our own. Hence, that mixed feeling of familiarity and strangeness that strikes us when we read the *Tractatus* today, similar to the ambivalence that overcomes us in the face of a Mondrian canvas or a Bauhaus construction. The link between the *Tractatus* and these other expressions of modernist aesthetics is made explicit in Wittgenstein’s house in Vienna – which one of Wittgenstein’s sisters rightly called not a human habitation but logic turned into architectonic form. With Malevich, Mondrian, Kandinsky and other modernists, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* shares moreover a distinctive turn towards the spiritual and the mystical. Attention to the pure forms of logic, to the structures of mathematics and the clear lines of geometry provides these modernists with the only clue to the spiritual they recognize. For all of them, the concern with form, far from being the expression of a positivistic scientism, is meant to give access to a new kind of spirituality cleansed of all the historical associations of traditional religion.

Measuring time

Wittgenstein’s thinking was to undergo profound change in the late twenties and early thirties. That’s true whatever view we take of the continuity of his thought. One signal of such change was his new concern with time in the *Philosophical Remarks* and the *Philosophical*

Grammar, another a new interest in history that is made explicit in his notes on the works of Oswald Spengler and Sir James Frazer.

In the *Philosophical Remarks* Wittgenstein speaks of two concepts of time: physical time and experiential time. In physical time, all moments are equally present as in a filmstrip. In experiential time we are, by contrast, always in the present as in the movie theater when we see only the presently projected image. He writes: "If I compare the facts of immediate experience with the pictures on the screen and the facts of physics with pictures in the filmstrip, on the filmstrip there is a present picture and past and future pictures. But on the screen, there is only the present." (PR, 51) And here it is important to note that the "is" in the proposition that "on the filmstrip there is a present picture," is once again the timeless "is" whereas in the proposition "But on the screen, there is only the present" we find the tensed "is." Wittgenstein flirts in the *Philosophical Remarks* even with the idea that we might have two kinds of language at our disposal: a physical and a phenomenological language in which we speak about time in these two different ways. But he finds this ultimately unviable and concludes: "I do not now have phenomenological language ... in mind as my goal." (PR, 1) Nonetheless, there remains for him the possibility of speaking about both physical and experiential time. In experiential time we find ourselves immersed in "the stream of life or the stream of the world" but always only at the present moment. In experiential time there is then, in a sense, no history; only an ever-changing present. And in physical time there is a past, a present, and a future but only as something static; the stream of life is there all at once, but fixed and frozen.

These considerations connect to Wittgenstein's simultaneous interest in the eleventh book of Augustine's *Confessions*. The *Blue Book* expresses sympathy for Augustine's puzzlement over the nature of time. No wonder that time is puzzling because it presents itself to us with two different faces. Wittgenstein is intrigued also with Augustine's question how it is possible to measure time since only the present moment is real. Admittedly he rejects Augustine's solution according to which we can measure the passing of time only in our minds. He adopts, instead, a view Augustine rejects, namely that we measure time by comparing its passing to another process such as the movements of a clock. Augustine is right in thinking that we can't measure

time in the way we measure other magnitudes. A table is present all at once and we measure its length by laying a measuring rod alongside it. The image of time being measured the same way is misleading. In physical time we can say that past, present, and future are equally present; but in experiential time only the present is there and its passing can therefore not be measured in the way we determine a spatial length. Wittgenstein had commented on the difficulty already in the *Tractatus* when he wrote: “We cannot compare any process with ‘the passage of time’ – there is no such thing but only with another process (say with the movement of a chronometer). Hence the description of a temporal sequence of events is only possible if we rely on another process.” (6.3611)

But if experiential time gives us only always a passing present, can we then have experiential knowledge of history? Wittgenstein holds that history is available to us only in memory but this memory is not a seeing into the past, as Russell had correctly observed in 1922 in *The Analysis of Mind*. This raises the question: “how do we know at all that it [i.e., memory] is to be taken as referring to the past?” We might say that in our memory we have a picture of the past. “But how do I know it’s a picture of the *past* unless this belongs to the essence of a memory image? Have we, say, learnt from experience to interpret these pictures as pictures of the past?” (PR, 50) Compared to Heidegger’s contemporaneous reflections on authentic temporality and historicity, these considerations seem narrow and cramped. Wittgenstein lacks any appreciation of the fact, understood by Heidegger, that our experience of the present is not of an atomic, unextended moment but of something directed both forwards and backwards. It is not simply that at every moment I also entertain in memory propositions about the past, but that my present experience is typically saturated through and through with the past, and at the same time intentionally directed forwards into the future. The experience of bare present is achievable, if at all, only through a rigorous process of abstraction or as a limit experience. None of this is realized, however, by Wittgenstein in the 1930’s and he may well have come to feel the insufficiency of his reflections on the topic given that he did not later on return to them.

There is, however, one observation in *Philosophical Remarks* that resonates with his later thought and that is the idea that “language unwinds in time.” (PR, 68) He adds to this: “That

everything flows must be expressed in the application of language, and in fact not in one kind of application as opposed to another but in *the* application. In anything we would ever call the application of language.” (PR, 54) With this idea Wittgenstein has moved decisively beyond the timeless picture of language in the *Tractatus*. Where the *Tractatus* had conceived language as a formal structure designed to map the equally formal structure of the world, Wittgenstein found himself induced to think now about such as activities as “giving orders and obeying them, ... making up a story and reading it, play-acting, ... making a joke and telling it; ... translating from one language into another; asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.”¹⁶ Talk about language-games would “bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life.” (PI, 23) And when he looked from this new perspective at the question how signs and sentences have meaning, the insufficiency of the formal account of meaning of the *Tractatus* struck home to him. Meaning could certainly not be reduced to a mapping relation between two formal structures. Instead, “if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its use.”¹⁷ But the use of a word “is extended in time.” (PI, 138)

The timeless picture of language of the *Tractatus* was thus replaced by one in which time figures essentially: in processes of learning, in conversational exchanges, and in the embedding of language in non-linguistic activities. If meaning is use then the meaning of our words has an inherently temporal dimension. The first section of the *Investigations* illustrates the point paradigmatically: “I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked ‘five red apples’. He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked ‘apples’; then he looks up the word ‘red’ in a table and finds a colour sample opposite, then he says the series of cardinal numbers ... up to the word ‘five’ and for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer.” The story involves eight distinct steps, eight different moments in time. The explanation of how the words “five red apples” have meaning for us has become completely temporalized.

But to recognize the temporal dimension of language and meaning is not the same as taking a historical view of human life. When we read Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* we are struck by his continuing lack of attention to language as a historical phenomenon. The

language-games he considers are for the most part abstract and almost always invented, not samples of actual, historically actualized uses of language. Wittgenstein strives to give a “natural history” of language, of “commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting” and other such uses of language. (PI, 25) But he is ready to “invent fictional natural history.” (PI II, p. 230) The remark testifies to Wittgenstein’s continuing abstract view of language. What is more, the term “natural history” has in this context no temporal connotations. Instead, of “natural history” Wittgenstein could also have said “phenomenology.”

Wittgenstein never became a historical writer in the way some of us are who seek to extend his lines of thinking. He became neither a historian of philosophy nor a dedicated philosopher of history, nor did he set out to reflect on language as a historical reality. What would he have thought of our endeavor to see him as a historical subject and to see his work as a response to a historical moment? Admittedly, we can’t ignore his fascination with Spengler’s *Decline of the West* and the historical and meta-historical it raises.¹⁸ But what exactly did he take from Spengler? I conjecture that it was due to Spengler that he would later on write of world-pictures as giving our individual acts and utterances their meaning. Spengler had spoken of the possession of such a world-picture as a unique cultural achievement, something far from being fixed and universal. He had talked of children and “primitive man” as lacking as yet any such thing. Only advanced cultures, he had declared, possess a concept of world and are therefore capable of constructing a coherent world-picture out of the mass of their heterogeneous knowledge. The resulting world-picture manifests itself in a culture’s “visible, tangible, and comprehensible expressions – acts and opinions, religion and state, art and sciences, peoples and cities, economic and social forms, speech, laws, customs, characters, facial lines, and costumes.” Wittgenstein may have been particularly struck by Spengler’s observation that “one condition of this higher world-consciousness is the possession of language, meaning thereby not mere human utterance but an encultured language (Kultursprache).” Non-historical man, so Spengler, has only a scattered set of beliefs. The possession of a single coherent picture of the world is, however, according to Spengler one precondition for a historical form of existence. The world picture of historical man will be, more specifically, one in which the world is seen as becoming not as become, that is as a dynamic rather than a static or even timeless reality. Spengler writes:

“‘Historical’ man, as I understand the word ... is the man of a Culture that is in full march towards self-fulfillment. Before this, after this, outside this man is *historyless*; ... From this there follows a fact of the most decisive importance, and one that has never before been established: that man is not only historyless before the birth of Culture, but again becomes so as soon as Civilization has worked itself out fully to the definitive form which betokens the end of the living development of the Culture and the exhaustion of the last potentialities of its significant existence.”¹⁹ According to Spengler the West has now reached the rigid state of civilization, a state in which the belief in progress, machines, and mechanical construction dominate and the Culture in its classical form has become defunct. We are familiar with such sentiments from Wittgenstein’s writings around 1931, the time when he was reading Spengler’s *Decline*. The affinities between the two are particularly evident from his 1931 “Sketch for a Foreword.”²⁰ We may then imagine that Spengler helped Wittgenstein to see that his own earlier anti-historicism was itself a symptom of the fact that the West was now in a state of civilization in which its living culture had deteriorated into a catatonic condition and that as a man without history, as which he had portrayed himself in his 1916 remark, he had unwittingly made himself part of that civilization from which he now felt so deeply alienated.

There are additional lessons Wittgenstein may have learned from Spengler. Spengler had argued also that when we grow into a culture we acquire our world-picture not “by definition or proof” but through “feeling, experience, and intuition.” He had spoken of world-pictures as a mythology on which a culture is built and here Wittgenstein appears to have taken him up once more when he wrote later on in *On Certainty* that the propositions describing a world-picture “might be part of a kind of mythology.” (OC, 95) Yet, there are also telling differences between Spengler’s and Wittgenstein’s notion of world-pictures. Spengler assumes that every great culture has a fixed world-picture that is created at the beginning of its history which it then develops until it is exhausted at which point the culture reaches a state of purely mechanical existence and finally a state of inevitable decline, a conditions that Spengler knows as “civilization.” Wittgenstein was certainly in tune with Spengler’s pessimism and his characterization of Western culture as having reached the state of civilization, but he spoke of world-pictures in *On Certainty* not as fixed but as dynamic entities. “The mythology may change

back into a state of flux,” he wrote famously, “the river-bed of thoughts may shift.” (OC, 97) He set himself thus apart from Spengler’s historical determinism and allowed for the possibility that “perhaps one day this civilization will produce a culture.” (CV, p. 64) Instead of assuming the existence of discrete world-pictures, Wittgenstein suggested that Spengler would have done better to have spoken of family resemblances within and between cultural epochs and cultures. In his notes on Frazer, he described magical and scientific culture as being held together by different webs of family resemblance and thus clearly constituting different families. In reflecting thus on historical cultures, Wittgenstein rejected Frazer’s attempt to think about culture as part of a continuous causal chain. He accepted, instead, Spengler’s “morphological” or, we might say, typological way of thinking in which cultures have to be seen as distinct realities with their own internal formation. This becomes evident on *On Certainty* with its preoccupation with the logical structure of world-pictures in which some elements are said to stand fast and to serve as axes or hinges around which other elements can turn. Interesting as this view is, it provides us, however, only with a limited picture of history since it reveals nothing of the forces that drive the process of historical variation. A political history will, by contrast, be inevitably causal and genealogical in character. It needs to deal with how events bear causally on each other, how we have traveled on the road of cause and effect to the present moment, and what causal effects current events and happenings may have on the future.

The Contingency of History

I turn now to a puzzle about time Russell first posed in *The Analysis of Mind* in 1922. That book is neglected these days even though it is of considerable significance for Wittgenstein’s thinking after 1930. Just as we can understand his work up to the *Tractatus* only through his engagement with Russell’s ideas from before 1914, we can fully comprehend Wittgenstein’s writings from the *Philosophical Remarks* to the *Blue Book* only as a critical encounter with Russell’s *Analysis of Mind*. Wittgenstein was certainly familiar with that work and also with the puzzle that Russell had posed in it. According to Russell: “There is no logical impossibility in the hypothesis that the world sprang into being five minutes ago... There is no logically necessary connection between events at different times; therefore nothing that is

happening now or will happen in the future can disprove the hypothesis that the world began five minutes ago.” It is thus theoretically possible that the past has not existed. Russell goes on to say of this hypothesis that “like all skeptical hypotheses, it is logically tenable, but uninteresting.” He is considering it only, “as a help in the analysis of what occurs when we remember.”²¹ Consider then, first, - to expand on Russell’s words - that the world has existed over time, just as we commonly believe, and that as such it contains all the traces of the past on which we rely now to reconstruct its history. Consider next, that our world has come into existence only a moment ago but with all those apparent traces of the past. These would then be mere pseudo-traces: pseudo-relics, pseudo-fossils, pseudo-documents, pseudo-memories, but they would look exactly like the real historical traces in the first world. Would we be able to tell the difference between these two worlds? And if not, why should we believe that the world has a history, has existed for a long time, and has not just come into existence with its pseudo-traces a moment ago? I want to call someone who denies that the world has a past at all “a radical historical skeptic.” There are obviously many variants on this case, since we may also assume that the world came into existence five minute ago, a year ago, 100 years ago, and so on. There are thus also many variations and degrees of historical skepticism.

I want to ask here what light Russell’s puzzle may throw on Wittgenstein’s lack of concern with history as he voiced it in 1916? The puzzle brings out that all the evidence we have of the past derives from something that exists currently. We envisage the past as a temporal sequence but are forced to determine the nature of that sequence by considering something that exists not as a temporal sequence, by considering a concurrent reality such as a written document now before us in which all the words are there on the paper at one and the same time. What we have as traces of the temporal, historical process are things that have a concurrent reality. We reconstruct the historical, in other words, from something that is not itself historical. And this might be taken to imply that historical knowledge is a derivative form of knowledge and if philosophy is concerned with what is first and fundamental in human thought (as Wittgenstein certainly believed), then it will preoccupy itself not with history but with how our current, momentary reality can give us the idea of history. From this point of view, history itself may

have no primary interest for the philosopher. So, there may be no surprise in Wittgenstein asking earlier: “What has history to do with me?”

I assume that Wittgenstein knew Russell’s puzzle from the early 1930’s onwards, but he discussed it at length only later in life. The first reference to it is to be found in part 2 of *Philosophical Investigation* where Wittgenstein writes that “the sentence ‘The Earth has existed for millions of years’ makes clearer sense than ‘The Earth has existed for the last five minutes’,” for we do not know what observations the second sentence refers to and what observations would count against it whereas the first sentence belongs to a circle of ideas (*Gedankenkreis*) and observations that are familiar.²² Interesting as this remark is, Wittgenstein does not draw further conclusions from it in the *Investigations*. It is only in *On Certainty* that he takes up the issue more thoroughly, examining numerous variations of Russell’s puzzle. Considering the possibility that someone may not believe that the earth has existed 150 years ago, he comments: “It strikes me as if someone who doubts the existence of the earth at that time is impugning the nature of all historical evidence. And I cannot say of the latter that it is definitely *correct*.” (OC, 188) The decisive point is here that historical evidence may convince us that the earth has existed for a long time, but that this will not force the skeptic to agree because he is always free to reinterpret the evidence. Wittgenstein continues this line of thought by adding: “I can imagine a man who had grown up in quite special circumstances and 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 would be trying to give him our picture of the world. This would happen through a kind of persuasion.” (OC, 262) So, we can’t prove to someone who thinks that the world came into existence only moments ago, or to someone who thinks that in order to understand the world we need not speak in historical terms that they are definitely mistaken for we are facing here fundamentally different world-pictures. Wittgenstein’s conclusion is simple but disturbing: the difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing.” (OC, 166) “In the end we can only say: “I have some evidence, but it does not go very far and is of a very scattered kind. I have heard, seen and read various things.” (OC, 600)

I conclude with a quick glance at the creationist debate since it can throw a further ray of light on the issues I am concerned with. Creationism is of interest to me because it is not only a philosophical or religious doctrine, but also a political matter. In America, where the issue is most hotly contended, the promotion of creationism is meant to serve as a tool for undermining the long-established separation of church and state with all the practical political consequences this implies. Creationism thus also illustrates the complexity of the relation between politics and history. It shows us that various forms of historical skepticism can themselves acquire political form. The question the creationist poses is whether there can there be conclusive evidence to disprove once and for all the claim that the world has come into existence only a few thousand years ago? Can the creationist not maintain his doctrine in the face of the entire geological and fossil record? Is it not possible for a God to have created the whole world a few millennia ago and, for his own mysterious reasons, with a spectacular array of pseudo-traces? It should be evident that there is no way of disproving once and for all the creationist and the same holds true for any other form of historical skepticism. The creationist will be able to maintain his position in the face of any possible evidence. These considerations have philosophical consequences. They show that radical historical skepticism, and indeed all forms of historical skepticism are logically irrefutable. They show also that creationists cannot be refuted by logically compelling reasons. They show furthermore that anti-historicist forms of philosophical thinking, whatever their form and whatever their motivation, cannot be refuted. They also show, of course, that historical forms of thinking cannot be defeated by anti-historicism in any of its forms. We can be sure then that the long struggle between historical and anti-historical modes of thought in philosophy and elsewhere will continue. All we can do on behalf of a properly historical and historicist view of things is to marshal our facts in such a way that we can convince others that we have comprehensive, coherent, and rich story to tell. They may or may not be persuaded by our endeavors.

Wittgenstein understood this point. In *On Certainty* he commented on creationism: “*Very* intelligent and well-educated people believe in the story of creation in the Bible, while others hold it as proven false, and the grounds of the latter are well known to the former.” (OC, 336) But these believers remain, nonetheless, unconvinced - not out of stubbornness but because there

can be no compelling argument to force either party to abandon their view. There are, however, considerations of the kind I have already mentioned that may undermine the creationist position. We can point out to him, first of all, that the traces or pseudo-traces of the past contain references to an apparent past. Our memories (or pseudo-memories) are of events that appear to lie further back than a moment ago. There exist documents that speak of events a thousand years ago. Some of the artifacts that surround us show signs of long-term deterioration. We discover fossils buried deeply under many layers of earth. When we assemble all these pieces of evidence we can construct a coherent narrative of a past. We should be able then to get the creationist (and also the historical skeptic) to grant us, at least, that it is possible to construct a quasi-history of the world on the basis of those traces or pseudo-traces of the past. The second consideration is that we as historians can tell a rich story of how the present has come about and why the apparent traces of the past are traces of a real past, whereas the creationist will have to refer to a mysterious event that put everything in its place as we now have it including all the things he considers to be pseudo-traces of a past that has never been. This consideration should help to weaken the creationist position, even though it cannot logically refute it. The case reveals two fundamental points about our knowledge of history. First, that history is a domain where coherence is a decisive criterion - not perhaps of "truth" - but of the acceptability of a claim. The past no longer exists and we can therefore not compare currently existing traces of the past with that past. A bare correspondence theory of truth is of no help here. History is also, second, a domain of knowledge where the existence of explanatory detail, the richness of our account is a criterion for choosing between alternative narratives.

I return to the point from which I started. My conclusion is that Spengler was right in thinking that we are only contingently historical beings. Both historical and historical forms of thought and historical and historical of life are available to us. And if it is correct that politics is itself, in some way or other, historical in character, then we have one more reason for holding that our existence as political beings is a contingent and historical fact about us. And with this we are back to the question what we might gain or what we might choosing to be both historical and political beings.

Notes

¹ Hannah Fennichel Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice. On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1972.

² Nietzsche described himself as “the last anti-political German” at a time when all the others, as he saw it, were only too willing to cheer the realities of the new German Reich.

³ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*, Free Press, New York 1990, pp. 51-52

⁴ *Geheime Tagebücher 1914-1916*, edited by Wilhelm Baum, Turia & Kant, Vienna 1991, pp. pp. 20 and 21.

⁵ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, 6.54. One might translate Wittgenstein’s German phrase even as “to *really* see the world.”

⁶ *Culture and Value*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1980, p. 16. (Translation modified)

⁷ Hans Sluga, *Wittgenstein*, Wiley-Blackwell, Boston 2011

⁸ Hans Sluga, „‘Der Mensch ist von Natur aus ein politisches Wesen.’ Zur Kritik der politischen Anthropologie,“

⁹ Little has been written on the theme of Wittgenstein and history, but see Hans-Johann Glock, “Wittgenstein and History,” in Alois Pichler and Simon Säätelä, *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works*,ontos verlag, Frankfurt 2006, pp. 277-303.

¹⁰ Hans Sluga, “Beyond ‘the new’ Wittgenstein”

¹¹ Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*

¹² *Philosophical Grammar*, 54

¹³ In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein speaks critically of the idea of the sublime nature of logic and I assume that in doing so he is referring back to his own early views.

¹⁴ Parmenides,

¹⁵ Schopenhauer, *World*, p. 179

¹⁶ *Philosophical Investigations*, 23

¹⁷ *Blue Book*, p. 4

¹⁸ *Culture and Value*, p. 19

¹⁹ O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, translated by Charles Francis Atkinson, vol. 2, Alfred E. Knopf, New York 1928, p. 48.

²⁰ *Culture and Value*, p.

²¹ Russell, *The Analysis of Mind*, p. 132.

²² *Philosophical Investigations*, Hacker-Schulte translation (modified), p. 233.