

NOTES ON WITTGENSTEIN AND HIS MILIEU

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I have pointed out elsewhere that William James had an influence on Wittgenstein's thoughts about the nature of philosophy.¹ The influence can be observed in their use of the word "craving" which brought attention to the psychological origins of philosophical questioning. The use of the term "craving" reflected their impassioned attitudes towards philosophy: e.g., "the craving for simplicity," "our craving for generality," "the craving for further explanation," and "the craving for rationality." These instances are interesting because they occur frequently in these two thinkers and they rarely occur in philosophical discourse, which makes the parallel most intriguing. Recently, I have found that the influence may run deeper historically than I had first proposed.

The notion of craving, i.e., a metaphysical craving, with its existential implications (like anguish, desire, need, striving, suffering) can be traced back to Wittgenstein's immediate Viennese environment and found in the writings of Thomas Mann and Arthur Schopenhauer. One of the statements I have in mind comes from Mann's introduction of his edition, *The Living Thoughts of Schopenhauer*, published in London in 1939:

Will, as the opposite pole of inactive satisfaction, is naturally a fundamental unhappiness, it is unrest, a striving for *something*—it is want, craving, avidity, demand, suffering; and a world of will can be nothing else but a world of suffering. The will objectivating itself, in all existing things, quite literally wreaks of the physical its metaphysical craving; satisfied that craving in the most frightful way in the world and through the world which is brought forth, and which, born of greed and compulsion, turns out to be a thing to shudder at (p. 8).²

The passages in Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* which are a counterpart to Mann's succinct summary of the will can be found in remarks which themselves refer to the idea of craving, wanting, striving. A sample of these are:

The will can be just as little cease from willing altogether on account of some particular satisfaction, as time can end or begin; for it there is no such thing as a permanent fulfillment which shall completely and for ever satisfy its craving.³

Also:

This great intensity of will is in itself and directly a constant source of suffering. In the first place, because all volition as such arises from want; that is, suffering.⁴

And with his usual poetic candor and forceful style, he gives the following moving description:

Awakened to life out of the night of unconsciousness, the will finds itself an individual, in an endless and boundless world, among unnumberable

individuals, all striving, suffering, erring; and as if though a troubled dream it hurries back to its old unconsciousness. Yet till then its desires are limitless, its claims inexhaustible, and every satisfied desire gives rise to a new one. No possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still its longings, set a goal to its infinite cravings, and fill the bottomless abyss of its heart.⁵

These dramatic, vivid descriptions of the tortured, psychic state which man has mistaken for his genius and his existence, according to Mann and Schopenhauer, fit in well with what we know of Wittgenstein himself. (I am primarily thinking of Norman Malcolm's *Memoir* [London, 1958] of Wittgenstein.) They also provide additional meaning to his discussions which mention craving.

One important difference between Wittgenstein and Schopenhauer is that the latter measured life and the will mainly by the locutions "craving," "striving," "want," "desire," etc.; whereas the former measured philosophy (especially metaphysics) by them. However, this difference may not be wholly true, for Schopenhauer does write extensively about the need for metaphysics.⁶ And Schopenhauer's discussion does sound very much like the sort of thing Wittgenstein refers to as "the craving for generality."

There is a passage from *The Blue Book* which I had left out of my earlier article that should be included in a context and discussion such as this. It will suffice to illustrate Wittgenstein's preoccupation with the psychological origins of philosophical questioning and the quote reads as follows:

What we did in these discussions [consider different criteria for what we call something] was what we always do when we meet the word "can" in a metaphysical proposition. We show that this proposition hides a grammatical rule. That is to say, we destroy the outward similarity between a metaphysical proposition and an experiential one, and we try to find the form of expressions which fulfils a certain craving of the metaphysician which our ordinary language does not fulfil and which, as long as it isn't fulfilled, produces the metaphysical puzzlement.⁷

Why was it so important for Wittgenstein to make statements like this throughout his discussions? Perhaps he had in mind the sort of human predicament and attitude which Schopenhauer describes; "The will now [when a person knows the whole and comprehends its nature] turns away from life; it now shudders at the pleasures in which it recognizes the assertion of life. Man now attains to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true indifference, and perfect will-lessness."⁸

Instead of turning away from life, Wittgenstein wanted to affirm life—to turn to the forms of life (*Lebensformen*) for an understanding of human activities. Perhaps this is why Wittgenstein spoke of *destroying* the outward similarities between a metaphysical proposition and an experiential one, because of the sort of world *they* can create. Such harsh language he deemed necessary to dispel myths as powerful as these.

Many of the parallels have already been observed, for example by Engel,⁹ between Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein, so I need not dwell on these. But there is one worth noting which I earlier called the medical analogy (p. 447). The discussion from Schopenhauer in this regard, which is worth quoting in its entirety, is:

Theoretical egoism ["in it a man regards and treats himself alone as a person, and all other persons as mere phantoms"] can never be demonstrably refuted, yet in philosophy it has never been used otherwise than as a sceptical sophism, i.e., a pretence. As a serious conviction, on the other hand, it could only be found in a madhouse, and as such it stands in need of a cure rather than a refutation. We do not therefore combat it any further in this regard, but treat it as merely the last stronghold of scepticism, which is always polemical. Thus our knowledge, which is always bound to individuality and is limited by this circumstance, brings with it the necessity that each of us can only *be one*, while, on the other hand, each of us can *know all*; and it is this limitation that creates the need for philosophy. We therefore who, for this very reason, are striving to extend the limits of our knowledge through philosophy, will treat this sceptical argument of theoretical egoism which meets us, as an army would treat a small frontier fortress. The fortress cannot indeed be taken, but the garrison can never sally forth from it, and therefore we pass it by without danger, and are not afraid to have it in our rear.¹⁰

Another example of the medical analogy, though of less significance than the one above, occurs in Schopenhauer's discussion of suicide: "... the suicide is like a sick man, who, after a painful operation which would entirely cure him has been begun, will not allow it to be completed, but prefers to retain his disease" (*The World as Will and Idea*, I, 516).

The most striking passages from the Wittgenstein corpus, which contain the notion of cure and allusions similar to the ones Schopenhauer made, are from the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*: "The philosopher is the man who has to cure himself of many sicknesses of the understanding before he can arrive at the notions of the sound human understanding. "If in the midst of life we are in death, so in sanity we are surrounded by madness."¹¹ Also: "The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of philosophical problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and of life, not through a medicine invented by an individual."¹² And in the *Zettel*, Wittgenstein makes use of the analogy in the following way: "In philosophizing we may not *terminate* a disease of thought. It must run its natural course, and *slow* cure is all important. (That is why mathematicians are such bad philosophers.)"¹³

From Wittgenstein's remarks it seems that such convictions are serious and ones which a philosopher must combat, for they are continually on the edge of his thoughts. And again, contrary to the implications of Schopenhauer's analogy, Wittgenstein would have seen a danger and fear in

egoism, because these convictions were within *him*—not without, as Schopenhauer's garrison metaphor suggests. For Wittgenstein these represent a haunting struggle and a decisive moment in a philosopher's searching journey.

And it may not be too hazardous to say that not only Wittgenstein found Schopenhauer, and perhaps even Thomas Mann, as a source and inspiration for this way of looking at things and talking about them, but that James may have also found Schopenhauer as a source of many ideas to which he responded in writing about *la condition humaine*.¹⁴ Finding such interesting, unconscious parallels tends to demonstrate how rich and fertile the general theses about Wittgenstein's life and times can be, in addition to testifying to their cogency.¹⁵

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¹ "On Wittgenstein and James," *The New Scholasticism*, XLVI (1972), 446-448.

² This characterization was first written in 1938 in German which reads as: "Wille, als Gegenteil ruhenden Genügens, ist an sich selbst etwas fundamental Unseliges; er ist Unruhe, Streben *nach* etwas, Nordurft, Lechzen, Gier, Verlangen, Leiden, und eine Welt des Willens kann nichts anderes, als eine Welt des Leidens sein. Der sich in allem Seienden objektivierende Wille büsst im Physischen seine metaphysische Lust in einem sehr wortlichen Sinn dieser Redensart: er 'busst' für sie aufs furchtbarste in der Welt und durch die Welt, die er hervorgebracht hat, und die als Werk der Begierde und der Drangsal sich gar schauerlich bewährt" *Schopenhauer* (Stockholm, 1938), pp. 25-26. The English translation is by H. T. Lowe-Porter; and it is included in Mann's *Essays of Three Decades* (New York, 1947), pp. 372-410, see p. 381 for the above passage. The German has been cited where the semantics is in question.

³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, trans. (3 vols.; London, 1883), I 467. The German for "craving" is *Streben* (used in this statement and in Mann's) can also be translated as striving after or struggling for something. The original sentence reads as: "Der Wille kann sowenig durch irgendeine Befriedigung aufhören, stets wieder von neuem zu wollen, als die Zeit enden oder anfangen kann: eine dauernde, sein Streben vollständig und auf immer befriedigende Erfüllung gibt es für ihn nicht." Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Wolfgang F. von Lohneysen, ed. (5 vols.; Darmstadt, 1968), I, 494.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 468. The German reads: "Jene grosse Heftigkeit des Wollens ist nun schon an und für sich und unmittelbar eine stele Quelle des Leidens. Erstlich, weil alles Wollen als solches ans dem Mangel, also dem Leiden entspringt." *Werke*, I, 495.

⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 382. And the German: "Aus der Nacht der Bewusstlosigkeit zum Leben erwacht, findet der Wille sich als Individuum in einer end-und grenzenlosen Welt unter zahllosen Individuen, alle strebend, leidend, irrend; und wie durch einen bangen Traum eilt er zurück zur alten Bewusstlosigkeit.—Bis dahin sind seine Wünsche grenzenlos, seine Ansprüche unerschöpflich, und jeder befreidgte Wunsch gebiert einen neuen. Keine auf er Welt mögliche Befriedigung konnte hinreichen, sein Verlangen zu stillen, seinem Begehren ein endliches Ziel zu setzen und den bodenlosen Abgrund seines Hergens auszufüllen." *Werke*, II, 733.

⁶ See ch. 17, "On Man's Need of Metaphysics," *ibid.*, II, 359-395; *Werke*, II, 206-243. See also the passage in note 10.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York, 1958), p. 55.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, I, 489-90; *Werke* I, 515; see the Mann passage for a close parallel.

⁹ S. Morris Engel, "Schopenhauer's Impact on Wittgenstein," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, VII (1969), pp. 285-302; reprinted in his *Wittgenstein's Doctrine of the Tyranny of Language* (The Hague, 1971), ch. IV, pp. 74-95.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, I, 135-36. This passage was selected by Mann as being one memorable by Schopenhauer; *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42. The original passage reads: "Der theoretische Egoismus ["nur die eigene Person als eine wirklich solche, alle übrigen aber als blosse Phantome ansieht und behandelt"] ist zwar durch Beweise nimmermehr zu widerlegen: dennoch ist er zuverlässig in der Philosophie nie anders denn als skeptisches Sophisma, d.h. zum Schein gebraucht worden. Als ernstliche Überzeugung hingegen könnte er allein im Tollhause gefunden werden: als solche bedürfte es dann gegen ihn nicht sowohl eines Beweises als einer Kur. Daher wir uns insofern auf ihn nicht weiter einlassen, sondern ihn allein als die letzte Feste des Skeptizismus, der immer polemisch ist, betrachten. Bringt nun also unsere stets an Individualität gebundene und eben hierin ihre Beschränkung habende Erkenntnis es notwendig mit sich, dass jeder nur eines *sein*, hingegen alles andere *erkennen* kann, welche Beschränkung eben eigentlich das Bedürfnis der Philosophie erzeugt: so werden wir, die wir ebendeshalb durch Philosophie die Schranken unserer Erkenntnis zu erweitern streben, jenes sich uns hier entgegenstellende skeptische Argument des theoretischen Egoismus ansehen als eine kleine Grenzfestung, die zwar auf immer unbezwinglich ist, deren Besetzung aber durchaus auch nie aus ihr herauskann, daher man ihr vorbeigehn und ohne Gefahr sie im Rücken liegen lassen darf." *Werke* I, 163.

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. (Oxford, 1964), Part IV (1942-3), sec. 53.

¹² *Ibid.*, Part I, Appendix II, sec. 4. For another example of the medical analogy, see Part II, sec. 80, where Wittgenstein speaks of a contradiction as a symptom of a sickness of the whole body (i.e., the calculus and not knowing our way about).

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. (Oxford, 1967) sec. 383.

¹⁴ See, for example, James' "The Sentiment of Rationality," reprinted in *Essays in Pragmatism*, Alburey Castell, ed. (New York and London, 1948), pp. 29f., for a discussion of the question of optimism or pessimism, "which makes so much noise just now [ca. 1880] in Germany."

¹⁵ For instance, I have in mind as a broad perspective *Wittgenstein's Vienna* by Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin (New York, 1973). For further discussion of Schopenhauer's influence on Wittgenstein's philosophy and of Toulmin's recent portrait, see my "On Placing Wittgenstein in History," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, XI (1973), Winter issue; and my "Historical Remarks on the Term 'Form of Life'," forthcoming, of which I read a portion at this meeting.

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