

Wittgenstein and Spengler

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In the midst of reflections on the Jewish mind recorded in 1931, we find Wittgenstein making the following comment on his own thought:

I don't believe I have ever invented a line of thinking, I have always taken one over from someone else. I have simply straightaway seized on it with enthusiasm for my work of clarification. That is how Boltzmann, Hertz, Schopenhauer, Frege, Russell, Kraus, Loos, Weininger, Spengler, Sraffa have influenced me. (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 19)

The appearance of Oswald Spengler's name on this list of those thinkers who Wittgenstein acknowledges as sources of influence has no doubt come as a surprise to many readers. In fact, however, as is shown by this remark, written in 1942 in the context of a discussion of mathematics, the above passage is not the only place where Wittgenstein directly acknowledges an influence from Spengler.

I just want to say: These people should not arrive at the view that they are making mathematical discoveries - but rather only physical discoveries. [How much indeed I am influenced by Spengler in my thinking.] (Wittgenstein, 1999, 125 31v 1 Apr, 1942)¹

Of course to acknowledge influence is to say very little about its nature. Rudolf Haller has given what I believe is, in the main, a very illuminating account of the influence that Spengler exerted on Wittgenstein. I should like to try to summarize and elaborate on this account here.

Haller contends, first, that it was not so much the *content* of Spengler's philosophy to which Wittgenstein was attracted, but rather its *method*, which Haller characterizes as that of a "Gestalt analysis of history" or the "method of descriptive morphology."²

The procedure for comparative research is to determine the archetypal forms taken by the passage of history, and to derive from them - per analogiam - statements that render the future predictable. Of course, these would not be the kinds of predictions that forecast the appearance of certain individual figures or the occurrence of particular events, but rather foretell the direction to be taken by the development of history: these are the content of morphological prognosis. (Haller, 1988, p. 79)

That Wittgenstein was attracted to aspects of Spengler's Gestalt analysis of history is supported by the following passage.

Reading Spengler, *Decline* etc. and finding, despite much that is irresponsible in specifics, many genuinely significant thoughts. *Much*, perhaps most of it, touches on what I myself have often thought. The possibility of several self-contained systems which, once one has them, look as though one were a continuation of the other. And all of this also connects with the thought that we really don't know (or consider) how much can be taken from or given to humans. (Wittgenstein, 1999, 183 17 6 May, 1930) ³

Haller does not claim, however, that Wittgenstein merely appropriates Spengler's method, but rather that he modifies it and employs it in a way that is not clearly traceable to its source. (Haller, 1988, p. 84) We can perhaps see the influence of this method of descriptive morphology in Wittgenstein's criticisms of Sir James Frazer's anthropological study of magic. Wittgenstein objects to Frazer's way of understanding the primitive rituals of his subjects as proto-scientific theories. Doing so leads Frazer to see a progressive development from these rituals to our modern scientific worldview. According to Wittgenstein, this is nothing more than a modern prejudice, a refusal to look at the actual facts, and a refusal to make a genuine attempt at understanding the real significance that these rituals had in the context of the lives of the people who practiced them. And so for Wittgenstein, Frazer fails to see how the rituals made sense to these people within an overall system of reference that differs from our modern causal scientific way of looking at the world.

The historical explanation, the explanation as an hypothesis of development, is only one way of assembling the data-of their synopsis. It is just as possible to see the data in their relation to *one* another an to embrace them in a general picture without putting it in the form of an hypothesis about temporal development. (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 131)⁴

But an hypothetical connecting link should in this case do nothing but direct the attention to the similarity, the relatedness, of the facts. As one might illustrate an internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually converting an ellipse into a circle; *but not in order to assert that a certain ellipse actually, historically, had originated from a circle* (evolutionary hypothesis), but only in order to sharpen our eye for a formal connection. (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 133)

As Haller also makes clear, Wittgenstein not only appropriates aspects of Spengler's method, "He reproaches Spengler for repeatedly making the mistake of extending the scope of statements true of the archetype of contemplation to the objects of

contemplation." (Haller, 1988, p. 84)⁵ This idea is particularly significant for what we might want to call the later Wittgenstein's "descriptive morphology" of language games. What this means is that for Wittgenstein, when we let something function as a prototype (*Urbild*) or paradigm (*Paradigma*) for a language game, then statements about the prototype are not ordinary assertions, but rather grammatical remarks that present to us the form of our discussion.⁶ If we are clear about the role of the prototype in our discussion, then we shall not be tempted to construe such grammatical remarks as necessary empirical *truths*, nor shall we be puzzled when our ordinary assertions about the objects of our discourse seem to lack the *necessity* that belongs to the grammatical remarks that hold only of the prototype. This is the upshot of this remark by Wittgenstein from 1937.

The only way for us to guard our assertions against injustice [Ungerechtigkeit] - or avoid vacuity in our assertions, is to have a clear view in our reflections of what the ideal is, namely an object of comparison - a yardstick, as it were - instead of making a prejudice of it to which everything *has* to conform. For this is what produces the dogmatism into which philosophy so easily degenerates. But then how is a view like Spengler's related to mine? Injustice in Spengler: The ideal doesn't lose any of its dignity if it's presented as the principle determining the form of one's reflections. A sound measure.-(Wittgenstein, 1980, pp. 26-27)⁷

I believe that these considerations provide compelling evidence for Haller's thesis that Spengler exerted an important influence on the later Wittgenstein's approach to language. At the very least we can say that some of the ideas that we now consider to be most characteristic of the later Wittgenstein's writings on language were born out of his reflecting on themes that he already found in Spengler. This, then, is his reason for including Spengler among those whose thinking he seized upon for his "work of clarification".

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Endnotes

- 1 This passage was found in the course of my research at the Wittgensteinarkivet in Bergen, Norway, where I spent one and one-half years as a Fulbright fellow from 1998-1999. For the purposes of producing its electronic edition of Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*, the Wittgensteinarkivet has adopted what has become the standard numbering system for the typescripts and manuscripts, namely that given by von Wright (1982). In the present case this would be vW 125 31v 1 Apr, 1942 , meaning "von Wright" number 125 page 31 verso. Where possible, I will also include the (sometimes estimated) date of composition, which this case is 1 April, 1942. All subsequent references to *Nachlass* material will follow this format. I also provide the original German in each case.
Ich will doch sagen: Diese Leute sollen nicht zu der Auffassung kommen, daß sie mathematische Entdeckungen machen- sondern *nur* physikalische Entdeckungen. [Wie sehr ich doch bei meinem Denken von Spengler beeinflusst bin]
- 2 Von Wright seems to agree with Haller here. He writes,
The actual influence pertains, it seems, chiefly to an idea in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, indeed to one of its most characteristic thought manouvres. This is the idea of 'family resemblance'. It appears to have its origin in Spengler's notion of the Ursymbol (archetype). This characterizes each one of the great cultures and constitutes what Wittgenstein, writing about this, in fact calls a family resemblance between a culture's various

manifestations - its mathematics, architecture, religion, social and political organization, and so forth. The decay of a culture is, in many ways, a dissolution of the resemblances which unite the ways of life and makes, as Wittgenstein puts it, that "the unimpressive spectacle of a crowd whose best members work for purely private ends..." (von Wright, 1982, p. 213)

There are a couple of things to be said here. First, von Wright suggests that Wittgenstein may have borrowed the idea of a family resemblance (*Familieähnlichkeit*) from Spengler. Given the importance of this idea for Wittgenstein's later thinking, this would be interesting in itself it were the case. It has been plausibly argued by S. Morris Engel (Engel, 1969), however, that Wittgenstein may well have first encountered the idea in Schopenhauer, who uses the term at least twice in the *World as Will and Representation*.

[Morphology] presents us with innumerable and infinitely varied forms that are nevertheless related by an unmistakable family likeness (*Familieähnlichkeit*). (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 97)

Knowledge of the unity of the will as thing-in-itself, amid the endless diversity and multiplicity of the phenomena, alone affords us the true explanation of that wonderful, unmistakable analogy of all nature's productions, of that family likeness (*Familieähnlichkeit*) which enables us to regard them as variations on the same ungiven theme. (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 154)

Though there is no way of knowing for sure, the clear reference to morphology tempts me to think that Schopenhauer, in turn, may have had the notion of family resemblance from Goethe (whom Spengler acknowledges as the source for many of the ideas in his work). Given Schopenhauer's admiration and personal acquaintance with Goethe, this seems to me to be entirely reasonable.

Next, von Wright speaks of Wittgenstein employing the idea of a family resemblance to distinguish between cultures whose various manifestations are related to each other as members of one family, and those cultures in which such connections have dissolved. I think we find an excellent example of what von Wright means in the following passage.

The music of every period corresponds to certain maxims of the good and the right from the same period. So we can recognize Keller's maxims in Brahms's music, etc. And therefore any music that has been invented today or recently, one that is thus modern, must appear absurd since if it corresponds to any one of the maxims that are *pronounced* today it must be rubbish. This statement is not easy to understand, but it is true: No one is clever enough today to articulate the good and *all* formulas and maxims that are pronounced are nonsense. The truth would sound *quite* paradoxical to all people. And the composer who feels it within himself must stand with his feeling in opposition to everything that is pronounced now, and according to current standards must also appear absurd and idiotic. But not *charmingly* absurd (since that is in fact what basically accords with the current view) but rather as *utterly inexpressive*. (my translation, original below)

(Wittgenstein, 1999, 183 59 27 Jan, 1931)

Die Musik aller Zeiten entspricht immer gewissen Maximen des guten und rechten der selben Zeit. So erkennen wir in Brahms die Grundsätze Kellers etc etc. Und darum muß eine Musik die heute oder vor kurzem gefunden wurde, die also modern ist, absurd erscheinen, denn wenn sie irgend einer der heute *ausgesprochenen* Maximen entspricht so muß sie Dreck sein.

Dieser Satz ist nicht leicht verständlich aber es ist so: Das Rechte heute zu formulieren dazu ist so gut wie niemand gescheit genug und *alle* Formeln, Maximen, die ausgesprochen werden sind Unsinn. Die Wahrheit würde allen Menschen *ganz* paradox klingen. Und der Komponist der sie in sich fühlt muß mit seinem Gefühl im Gegensatz stehen zu allem jetzt Ausgesprochenen und muß also nach den gegenwärtigen Maßstäben absurd, blödsinnig, erscheinen. Aber nicht *anziehend* absurd (denn das ist das was doch im Grunde der heutigen Auffassung entspricht) sondern *nichtssagend*.

- 3 Lese Spengler, *Untergang* etc. und finde trotz des vielen Unverantwortlichen im Einzelnen, *vielen* wirkliche, bedeutende Gedanken. Vieles, vielleicht das Meiste, berührt sich ganz mit dem was ich selbst oft gedacht habe. Die Möglichkeit einer Mehrzahl abgeschlossener Systeme welche wenn man sie einmal hat ausschauen als sei das eine die Fortsetzung des Anderen. Und das hängt alles auch mit dem Gedanken zusammen, daß wir gar nicht wissen (bedenken) wieviel dem Menschen genommen - oder auch gegeben - werden kann.

- 4 These remarks were written in 1931, probably less than a year after the passage above where Wittgenstein says that he is currently reading Spengler. Another very interesting detail that Haller points out is that part of *Philosophical Investigations* §122, a well known remark on philosophical method, was taken from these same remarks on Frazer. Here is how the relevant part of the remark appears in §122:

The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things. (Is this a 'Weltanschauung'?)

In the original manuscript the remark appears in identical form, except for the parenthetical remark. It reads " (Eine Art der 'Weltanschauung' wie sie scheinbar für unsere Zeit typisch ist. Spengler.)

- 5 See also pp. 85-86

- 6 The expression 'prototype' already appears in the Wittgenstein, 1979 (Cf. 11.12.1914 , and 05.08.1915) and in Wittgenstein, 1974 (Cf. *TLP* 3.315). Although there is no question that its role in these early writings is quite different from the way he employs the expression later, I believe that one could trace (morphologically, perhaps) the evolution of this and related expressions such as 'paradigm', if one began with Wittgenstein's early interest in Hertz's use of models in physical theories and Frege's so-called "context principle". The expressions 'prototype' and 'paradigm', though important for Wittgenstein's later work in general, are particularly important for his writings on mathematics. He sometimes uses the two expressions 'prototype' and 'paradigm' interchangeably. See Wittgenstein, 1978, p. 148

- 7 Winch translates 'Ungerechtigkeit' as 'distortion'. Most of this remark appears in Wittgenstein, 1973, §131. As with §122, the references to Spengler have been removed. For more on the role of the concept of an object of comparison in Wittgenstein's work, see Diamond, 2001.