

Aspects of Modernism and Modernity in Wittgenstein's Early Thought

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1. Introduction

The issue of Wittgenstein's relation to his times has not escaped the attention of Wittgenstein scholarship, especially after 1973 when Janik and Toulmin's *Wittgenstein's Vienna* was published, a work that constitutes the first contextual approach to his life and thought to have wide impact. We can discern two main themes in this area, the first being the relation of Wittgenstein to various facets of modernism (Janik and Toulmin 1973, Eagleton 1993, Perloff 1996, Puchner 2005, Paden 2007), and the second his stance toward modernity (von Wright 1982, Bouveresse 1991, DeAngelis 2007). Despite the diversity of the above-mentioned works, there are two general theses that appear to emerge from them. First, that Wittgenstein's philosophizing fits in several intriguing ways with the modernist agenda, and, second, that Wittgenstein constitutes a typical example of a thinker alienated from, or even hostile to, modernity. What I suggest in this paper, by focusing on Wittgenstein's early phase, is that while both claims illuminate significant features of his work and personality, they can not be accepted without qualification.

Before moving to the main discussion, just a few words about the way in which "modernism" and "modernity", terms that are both extensively discussed and diversely characterized, will be used in this paper. The term "modernism", like the vast majority of "-isms", is a characteristic instance of a family-resemblance term, as it covers a multiplicity of cultural movements, intellectuals, and historic periods which are rather connected through a series of overlapping similarities than by a single common trait – in fact, certain modernist movements and intellectuals are in orthogonal opposition or even flat-out contradiction with each other. Hence, "modernism" as it is used in this paper does not designate a set of shared properties that constitute the essence of modernism, but indicates the existence of certain attributes, such as ahistoricity, self-referential autonomy, and constructional impulses, that allow for the categorization of movements, works and individuals of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century under it. Regarding "modernity", similar remarks apply to it, and here the term is used as indicating a socio-historico-cultural concept that covers the period from the rise of the Enlightenment up to the first half of the 20th century, exhibiting features such as the rise of liberalism, the dogmatization of the Enlightenment principles, and the exclusive authority of reason in the form of scientific rationality.

2. Early Wittgenstein and Modernism

Existing works on the relation of early Wittgenstein to modernism offer us sundry approaches that highlight the various modernist qualities of his work. Thus, we find the *Tractatus* treated as "the first great work of philosophical modernism" (Eagleton 1993, p. 5), since its self-referential autonomy – one of the principal features and ideals of various forms of modernism, and one that is demonstrated in the *Tractatus* by the attempt to delimit language from within – is pushed to the extreme in its penultimate remark, leading finally to the work's illuminating self-destruction. The literary style of the *Tractatus* is another characteristic that is often viewed as exhibiting modernist traits. The

fusion of a hierarchical, numbered structure with non-argumentative aphorisms together with the polemical content of the text, link the *Tractatus* to the tradition of manifestos – a common literal medium for conveying the theses of various modernist and avant-garde movements – with its aphorisms playing a double role as both polemic/programmatic declarations and revelatory manifestations (Puchner 2005). For Janik and Toulmin, it is actually the whole of Wittgenstein's philosophical agenda – but again especially his early work – that is shaped by the modernist context of late 19th/early 20th century Vienna. More specifically, their study relates Wittgenstein to the works and views of Kraus, Loos, Mauthner, Schoenberg, Weininger, Hertz and Boltzmann among others, with the problematics of communication in general and of language in particular playing a central role, and the fact/value distinction being another of its important aspects (see Janik and Toulmin 1973). Janik would later explicitly distinguish two strata of Viennese modernism, namely aesthetic (the Secession, "*Jugendstil*") and critical (Kraus, Loos, Weininger), and would categorize Wittgenstein as a critical modernist (Janik 2001a, 2001b).¹ The viewpoint of Janik and Toulmin is adopted by Paden, albeit in slightly modified terms, in his discussion of Wittgenstein's architectural endeavor, where he treats critical and aesthetic modernism as reflections of the worldviews of the Enlightenment and of Romanticism respectively. Paden also discerns characteristics of aesthetic modernism in Wittgenstein's life and work, especially during and after his military service in WWI (Paden 2007, p. 189-195).

Although the above approaches offer us valuable insights regarding the position of Wittgenstein in relation to the diverse faces of modernism, we should not fail to notice that without further qualification they do not do full justice to his stance, as they are not unproblematic from both a systematic and an historical-biographical point of view. Janik and Toulmin, for example, in their attempt to differentiate their "ethical" reading of the *Tractatus* from the, at the time, standard positivist readings of the work, tend to overemphasize Wittgenstein's Viennese modernist influences in comparison to the rest, like those of Frege and Russell. Hence, they do not only follow, although from a different viewpoint, the positivist readings in their attempt to resolve the intrinsic tension between the logical and the ethical aspects of the work, but they also, principally through their claim that Wittgenstein's philosophical problematics was already formed before his arrival at Cambridge, appear to downplay the various changes in Wittgenstein's approach, in particular those that occurred during WWI.

3. Early Wittgenstein and Modernity

Wittgenstein's antipathy to the spirit of the modern Western civilization, as this is manifested in the aesthetics and intellectual activity of the time, in the vital role of industrial-

¹ Note that for Janik, both aesthetic and critical modernism originate in the failure of Austrian liberalism and thus are critical of modernity, with the former totally rejecting it and the latter being after "an immanent critique of its limits" (Janik 2001b, p. 40).

zation for the societies, in the idolization of progress, and in the imperialism of science (see Wittgenstein 1998, p. 8-11), at first sight may appear to constitute one of his constant reference points, especially when combined with the remarks in the *Tractatus* (§6.371 - §6.372 and §6.52) on the role and the status of science in the modern world. A closer look at later Wittgenstein's retrospective (self)critical remarks, however, shows that this is not the case, as there are several traces of scientism that can be found in his early work. Also, two of the prime targets of his later critique, namely, dogmatism and essentialism, characterize not only modernity (and aspects of modernism), but the *Tractatus* itself as well.²

On the one hand, the maintenance of the fact/value dichotomy in the *Tractatus* seems to achieve its goal of safeguarding ethics and aesthetics from disputes and speculation. On the other hand, the identification of what can be meaningfully said with the propositions of natural science overestimates science's role, reinforcing its imperialistic tendencies over the other aspects of human thought and life (see Wittgenstein 1998, p. 70). This, together with Tractarian logical analysis being modelled on the scientific modes of analysis (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 11), provide us two of the most characteristic instances of scientific lapses in Wittgenstein's early thought. Regarding dogmatism, we can discern its main manifestations in the idea of 'future discovery' that the quasi-scientific Tractarian logical analysis maintains, e.g., of elementary propositions (*ibid.*), and the ideal not functioning as a unit of measurement, but as "a preconception to which everything must conform" (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 30). Early Wittgenstein's conception of the general form of the proposition is a telling example. Finally, as far as essentialism is concerned, there are three interrelated themes that we can distinguish in relation to the *Tractatus*: the "craving for generality" (Wittgenstein 1969, p. 17-19), i.e., the disposition to look for properties that are, or rather *must* be, common to all the instances of the application of a general term; the presupposed "formal unity" that the rules of the logical calculus that governs language and reflects the logical construction of the world are taken to display in the form of the "crystalline purity" of logic (Wittgenstein 2001, §108 p. 40); and the idea of the existence of a hidden essence behind our everyday use of language, an essence that is identified in the *Tractatus* with the notion of logical form. It is important to note that due to the high internal coherence of the text these signs of scientism, dogmatism and essentialism appear diffused across the various parts of the work, e.g., in the theses on the determinacy of sense and the uniqueness and completeness of logical analysis, in the picture theory of meaning, and in logical atomism. It is from this perspective that Wittgenstein's later rejection (Wittgenstein 1998, p.10) of the ladder-scheme (§6.54) that is so crucial for the Tractarian enterprise and its goal of the adoption of a God's eye viewpoint, has strong implications for the philosophical approach that the work expresses and can thus be treated as an exemplar case of "turning our whole examination round" (Wittgenstein 2001, §108 p. 40), i.e. as a radical shift in Wittgenstein's philosophizing.

4. Conclusion

What I hope to have made clear by the, unavoidably sketchy, discussion above is the intriguing position that the *Tractatus* occupies as far as the historical-intellectual context of the era is concerned. Once the proper viewpoints are adopted, many of its features are seen to fit firmly with parts of the agendas of both modernism and modernity, while at the same time this very fact – the coexistence of elements from both and the subsequently emerging tensions between them – disqualifies any attempt to categorize early Wittgenstein as either a typical modernist or modernity thinker. Even more interestingly, the tension between the modernist and the modernity components of the *Tractatus* gains a dialectical character. For the opposition to certain aspects of modernity exhibited in numerous modernist endeavours shares to a significant extent some of modernity's prerequisite qualities. Thus, the whole dispute is based on a common background in which chronic tendencies like essentialism and dogmatism can be clearly discerned.³ The above picture appears to do more justice to Wittgenstein's early work since its modernist and anti-modernity traits are simultaneous with scientific lapses and an overall essentialist and dogmatic approach. The *Tractatus* is not so much an attempt to *put an end* to metaphysics as the point where traditional philosophy is forced to its limits and turns against itself. It is an attempt to *be itself the end* of traditional philosophizing, to be its *teleiosis*. The full-frontal polemics of the *Tractatus* does not constitute the radical break with the past that its author intended it to be. It tries, so to speak, to fight the system from within, to change the rules of the game by following these very same rules. Wittgenstein's real radical break with the tradition of modernity comes later on, with the guerrilla warfare approach of his later writings, where the centralized and unified approach of his early work is replaced by a multiplicity of approaches focusing on specific cases, by his unique kind of philosophical therapeutic pluralism.

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² For a detailed discussion of the scientific, essentialistic and dogmatic elements of Wittgenstein's early thought see Kitching (2003).

³ Are not the modernist manifestos – propagandistic media par excellence – indicative of a dogmatic stance? Or are not the diverse aspects of formalism and the embraced abstract fundamentals in modernist art, philosophy and science, instantiations of the long-lasting influence of the essentialist tradition? See Foucault (1984) and Toulmin (1990, p. 145-160) for discussions of modernity in which its shared basis with modernism stands out, while for a discussion of a specific instance of this convergence, which partially covers the case of early Wittgenstein too, see Galison (1990).

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