

## CHAPTER SIX

### PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR CULTURAL STUDIES

Philosophy has provided Cultural Studies with a number of useful perspectives. Although we can reach back to Ancient Greek philosophy to trace the history of particular ideas it is probably Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 -1900) who provided the first direct insights on thinking about contemporary culture.

In an unpublished essay of 1873, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche rejects the idea of universal constants and claims that what we call **“truth” is only “a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms.”** His view at this time is that arbitrariness dominates human experience. Concepts originate through the transformation of nerve stimuli into images and “truth” is nothing more than the invention of fixed conventions for practical purposes, especially those of repose, security and consistency. Nietzsche also observes that there was an eternity before human beings came into existence and believes that after humanity dies out, nothing significant will have changed in the great scheme of things.

In ***Beyond Good and Evil, Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*** Nietzsche identifies imagination, self-assertion, danger, originality and the “creation of values” as qualities of genuine philosophers, as opposed to incidental characters who engage in dusty scholarship. Nietzsche takes aim at concepts such as “self-consciousness,” “free will,” and “either/or.” He advances a viewpoint of life located beyond good and evil and challenges the conventional moral idea that exploitation, domination, injury to the weak, destruction and appropriation are universally objectionable behaviours. He believes that living things aim to discharge their strength and express their **“will to power”** — an outpouring of expansive energy like the sun that can entail danger, pain, lies, deception and masks. Here, “will” is not an inner emptiness or lack or a feeling of deficiency or a constant drive for satisfaction, but is a fountain of energy or power.

As he views things from the viewpoint of life, Nietzsche further denies that there is a universal morality which can apply to all human beings and instead describes a series of moralities in an order of rank that ascends from the plebeian to the noble. Some moralities are more suitable for subordinate roles, some are more appropriate for dominating and leading social roles. What counts as a preferable and legitimate action depends upon the kind of person one is. The deciding factor is whether one is weaker, sicker and on the decline, or whether one is healthier, more powerful and overflowing with life.

Nietzsche's thought extended a deep influence during the 20th century, especially in Continental Europe. In English-speaking countries, his positive reception has been less marked. During the last decade of Nietzsche's life and the first decade of the 20th century, his thought was particularly attractive to avant-garde artists who saw themselves on the periphery of established social fashion and practice. Here, Nietzsche's advocacy of new, healthy beginnings, and of creative artistry was prominent. His tendency to seek explanations for commonly-accepted values and outlooks in the less-elevated realms of sheer animal instinct was also crucial to Sigmund Freud's development of psychoanalysis. Later, during the 1930's, aspects of Nietzsche's thought were espoused by the Nazis and Italian Fascists, partly due to the encouragement of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche through her associations with Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. It was possible for the Nazi interpreters to assemble, quite selectively, various passages from Nietzsche's writings whose juxtaposition appeared to justify war, aggression and domination for the sake of nationalistic and racial self-glorification.

Until the 1960s in France, Nietzsche appealed mainly to writers and artists, since the academic philosophical climate was dominated by G.W.F. Hegel's, Edmund Husserl's and Martin Heidegger's thought, along with the structuralist movement of the 1950's. Nietzsche became especially influential in French philosophical circles during the 1960's to 1980's, when his "God is dead" declaration, his perspectivism, and his emphasis upon power as the real motivator and explanation for people's actions revealed new ways to challenge established authority and launch an effective social critique.

Specific 20th century figures who were influenced, either quite substantially, or in a significant way, by Nietzsche include painters, dancers, musicians, playwrights, poets, novelists, psychologists, sociologists, literary theorists, historians, and philosophers. For the philosophical basis in Cultural Studies Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are important disciples of Nietzsche.

A second philosopher to have an impact on Cultural Studies particularly in terms of language usage is, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). For Wittgenstein language is a tool specific to its context used by human beings where the meanings of words are created in use. He argued that words do not derive their meaning from the essential characteristic of an independent referent but that meaning arises in the context of what he called **a language-game**. Language-games are rule-bound activities, but these rules are not abstract components of language but are constitutive through their enactment in social practice.

Wittgenstein's characterization of philosophy: philosophy is not a theory, or a doctrine, but rather an activity. It is an activity of clarification of thoughts and more so, of the critique of language. As described by Wittgenstein, it should be the philosopher's routine activity to react or respond to the traditional philosophers' musings by showing them where they go wrong, using the tools provided by logical analysis. In other words, by showing them that some of their propositions are nonsense.

"For a large class of cases of the employment of the word 'meaning' — though not for all — this way can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language."

Traditional theories of meaning in the history of philosophy were intent on pointing to something exterior to the proposition which endows it with sense. This 'something' could generally be located either in an objective space or inside the mind as mental representation. Wittgenstein took pains to challenge these conceptions, arriving at the insight that "if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its use."

When investigating meaning, the philosopher must "look and see" the variety of uses to which the word is put. An analogy with tools sheds light on the nature of words. If we think of tools in a toolbox, we do not fail to see their variety. However, the "functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects". We are misled by the uniform appearance of our words into theorizing upon meaning: "Especially when we are doing philosophy!"

So different is this new perspective that in his major work **Philosophical Investigations** Wittgenstein repeats: "Don't think, but look!" and such looking is done through specific cases, not generalizations. In giving the meaning of a word, any explanatory generalization should be replaced by a description of use. The traditional idea that a proposition contains a content and has a restricted number of forces, such as assertion, question and command, gives way to an emphasis on the diversity of uses. In order to address the countless multiplicity of uses, their un-fixedness, and their being part of an activity, Wittgenstein introduces the key concept of 'language-game'.

Secondly, the concept of language-games points at the rule-governed character of language. This does not entail strict and definite systems of rules for each and every language-game, but points to the conventional nature of this sort of human activity. Still, just as we cannot

give a final, essential definition of 'game', so we cannot find "what is common to all these activities and what makes them into language or parts of language."

It is here that Wittgenstein's rejection of general explanations, and definitions based on sufficient and necessary conditions, is best pronounced. Instead of these symptoms of the philosopher's "craving for generality", he points to 'family resemblance' as the more suitable analogy for the means of connecting particular uses of the same word. There is no reason to look, as we have done traditionally—and dogmatically—for one, essential core in which the meaning of a word is located and which is, therefore, common to all uses of that word. We should, instead, travel with the word's uses through "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing." Family resemblance also serves to exhibit the lack of boundaries and the distance from exactness that characterize different uses of the same concept.

Wittgenstein begins by introducing an example: "... we get a pupil to continue a series (say '+ 2') beyond 1000—and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012". What do we do, and what does it mean, when the student, upon being corrected, answers "But I did go on in the same way"? Wittgenstein proceeds to dismantle the cluster of attendant questions:

How do we learn rules?

How do we follow them?

Where are the standards from which decide if a rule is followed correctly?

Are they in the mind, along with a mental representation of the rule?

Do we appeal to intuition in their application?

Are they socially and publicly taught and enforced?

The answers are not pursued positively; rather, the very formulation of the questions as legitimate questions with coherent content is put to the test. For indeed, it is both the Platonistic and mentalistic pictures which underlie asking questions of this type and Wittgenstein desires to free us from these assumptions. Such liberation involves ridding ourselves of the need to propose any sort of external or internal authority beyond the actual applications of the rule.

These considerations lead to the climax of the issue: "This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here." Wittgenstein's formulation of the problem, now at the point of being a "paradox", has given rise to a wealth of interpretation and debate since it is clear to all that this is the crux of the general issue of meaning and of understanding and using a language. Directly following the rule-following sections in *Philosophical Investigations*, and therefore easily thought to be the consequence of the discussion, are those sections called by interpreters "the private-language argument". Whether it be an actual argument or not these sections point out that for an utterance to be meaningful it must be possible in principle to subject it to public standards and criteria of correctness. For this reason, a private-language, in which "words ... are to refer to what only the speaker can know—to his immediate private sensations ..." is not a genuine, meaningful, rule-governed language. The signs in language can only function when there is a possibility of judging the correctness of their use, "so the use of a word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands"

Grammar, usually taken to consist of the rules of correct syntactic and semantic usage, becomes, in Wittgenstein's hands, the wider—and more elusive—network of rules which determine what linguistic move is allowed as making sense, and what isn't. "Essence is expressed in grammar ... Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is." The "rules" of grammar are not mere technical instructions from on-high for correct usage. Rather they express the norms for meaningful language. Contrary to empirical statements, rules of grammar describe how we use words in order to both justify and criticize our particular utterances. But as opposed to grammar-book rules, they are not idealized as an external system to be conformed to. Moreover, they are not appealed to explicitly in any formulation,

but are used in cases of philosophical perplexity to clarify where language misleads us into false illusions. Thus, "I can know what someone else is thinking, not what I am thinking. It is correct to say 'I know what you are thinking', and wrong to say 'I know what I am thinking.'

Grammar is not abstract, it is situated within the regular activity with which language-games are interwoven: "... the word 'language-game' is used here to emphasize the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of "a form of life." What enables language to function and therefore must be accepted as "given" are precisely forms of life. In Wittgenstein's terms, "It is not only agreement in definitions but also (odd as it may sound) in judgments that is required" and this is "agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life". This concept has given rise to interpretative quandaries and subsequent contradictory readings. Forms of life can be understood as changing and contingent, dependent on culture, context, history, and so forth. This appeal to forms of life provides a justification for a relativistic reading of Wittgenstein. On the other hand, it is the form of life common to humankind, "shared human behavior" which is "the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language." This might be seen as a universalistic turn, recognizing that the use of language is made possible by the human form of life.

## IMPORTANT THINKERS

**Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844 – 1900) was a German philosopher, cultural critic, poet and Latin and Greek scholar whose work has exerted a profound influence on Western philosophy and modern intellectual history. He began his career as a classical philologist before turning to philosophy. He became the youngest person ever to hold the Chair of Classical Philology at the University of Basel at the age of 24. Nietzsche resigned in 1879 due to the health problems that plagued him most of his life and he completed much of his writing in the following decade. In 1889 at age 44, he suffered a mental collapse and lived his remaining years in the care of his mother and then with his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche.

Nietzsche's writing spanned philosophical polemics, poetry, cultural criticism, and fiction, and drew widely on art, philology, history, religion, and science. His writing engaged with a wide range of subjects including morality, aesthetics, tragedy, epistemology, atheism and consciousness. Some prominent elements of his philosophy include his radical critique of reason and truth in favor of perspectivism, his genealogical critique of religion and Christian ethics and his related theory of master – slave morality his affirmation of existence in response to the "death of God" and the profound crisis of nihilism. He characterized the human subject as the expression of competing wills, collectively understood as the will to power. In his later work, he developed influential concepts such as the Übermensch and the doctrine of eternal return, and became preoccupied with the creative powers of the individual to overcome social, cultural, and moral contexts in pursuit of aesthetic health.

**Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889 – 1951) was an Austrian-British philosopher who worked primarily in logic, the philosophy of mathematics, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of language. From 1929 to 1947, Wittgenstein taught at the University of Cambridge.[8] During his lifetime he published just one slim book, the 75-page *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), one article, one book review and a children's dictionary. His voluminous manuscripts were edited and published posthumously. **Philosophical Investigations** appeared as a book in 1953, and has since come to be recognised as one of the most important works of philosophy in the twentieth century.

He was born in Vienna into one of Europe's richest families and inherited a large fortune from his father in 1913. He gave considerable sums to poor artists. In a period of severe personal depression after the First World War, he then gave away his entire fortune to his brothers and sisters. He served as an officer on the front line during World War I, where he was decorated a number of times for his courage. He taught in schools in remote Austrian villages where he encountered controversy for hitting children when they made mistakes in mathematics and working as a hospital porter during World War II in London where he told

patients not to take the drugs they were prescribed while largely managing to keep secret the fact that he was one of the world's most famous philosophers. He described philosophy as "the only work that gives me real satisfaction."

His philosophy is often divided into an early period, exemplified by the *Tractatus*, and a later period, articulated in the *Philosophical Investigations*. The early Wittgenstein was concerned with the logical relationship between propositions and the world and believed that by providing an account of the logic underlying this relationship, he had solved all philosophical problems. The later Wittgenstein rejected many of the assumptions of the *Tractatus*, arguing that the meaning of words is best understood as their use within a given language-game.

## MAIN POINTS RELEVANT TO CULTURAL STUDIES

### NIETZSCHE

- "Truth" is only "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms." This indicates how Nietzsche's thinking anticipated scepticism about notions of objective truth and the representational certainty of language. Derrida's "différance" is clearly a descendant of this.
- "Will to power." A concept which was perverted by the Nazis, it refers to the expressive and creative potential of a human being freed from the restrictions of normative social values. It challenges feelings that the values we have are "natural" and are thus exempt from examination.
- Perspectivism (*Perspectivismus*), a neologism of Nietzsche's in developing the philosophical view that all formation of concepts take place from particular perspectives.
- God is dead. (God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it.  
The phrase "God is dead" does not mean that Nietzsche believed in an actual God who first existed and then died in a literal sense. It conveys his view that the Christian God is no longer a credible source of absolute moral principles. Nietzsche recognizes the crisis that the death of God represents for existing moral assumptions: "When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident... By breaking one main concept out of Christianity, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands."

### WITTENGENSTEIN

- Language-game. Wittgenstein introduces this famous concept to replace the view of language as consisting of propositions governed by rules with one where words have a multiplicity of uses depending on their particular context, where meaning is only contained in that context and their being part of an activity.
- Family resemblance. In order to support the concept of language game and counter an absurd consequence of the notion of a word's sense being entirely arbitrary he introduced this concept to connect uses of the same word, not in a lexicological quest to find core meaning, but to understand networks of similarity in use.

- Private language argument. This was developed by Wittgenstein's interpreters as he pointed out that a private language which only the user can understand cannot be meaningful as the signs used in language can only function when their correctness in use can be judged.

## SEMINAR EXERCISES

- With a partner write down some sentences about life which you think are true. Exchange them with another partner's. Now analyze their sentences for metaphorical language.
- With a partner write down some values of the culture to which you belong. Now analyze these values to see how far they limit your freedom or enable your freedom.
- Class discussion. Make notes on these questions. How many decisions do you make where your religion plays an important role?
- Write down three sentences with subject verb and object. Don't use the verb „to be.“ Can you classify these sentences as facts?
- Think of an English word that is important to you. Now write down as many uses of the word that you can think of. Can you see a pattern in these different sentences?
- In a small group discuss the language of small children. Could this be described as a „private language“ in the sense that Wittgenstein uses it?

## READING

### Primary

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Jackson, R. *Nietzsche: A Beginner's Guide*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2007

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See also:

Barker, Chris. *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies*. London: Sage Publications, 2004

See on-line

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/>

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein/>