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# Archaeology and the philosophy of Wittgenstein

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with a comment by Julian Thomas and a reply by John Bintliff

## Abstract

To the student of archaeology, the educated layperson, the academic lecturer and the practising professional field archaeologist, contemporary archaeology means something quite different. The discipline has fragmented, and whether by choice or necessity or preference, the reading material and often the practical research work associated with each of these communities are distinct. Little or no communication between these groups occurs. Although an extreme postmodern relativist might rejoice in the splintering of the subject, so that anyone's approach to the past – however undisciplined and fantastic, is as worthwhile as traditional concepts of a structured method and theory, most archaeologists hope for a resolution of these tendencies to disciplinary ghettoisation. But how can we achieve such a programme of unification, given the extremely diverse forms of theory and practice that we see today? Can archaeology be a science and yet reject positivism? Can it be political and yet reject political bias? Can it be a subject prone to measurement and yet allow us to recover emotion for the discipline? Can it be multivocal and yet act as a sober critic of the abuse of the past for ideological propaganda?

One major thinker, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, has encompassed all these problems in his masterly 'philosophy to end all philosophy'. In this contribution I intend to present a brief account of Wittgenstein's solution to the fragmentation of knowledge about the world around us. How all this solves the current theoretical and methodological problems of the discipline of archaeology can then be swiftly and easily disposed of in the conclusion of the paper.

## Introduction

Wittgenstein is widely regarded as the most important philosopher of the 20th century (most recently by Quine), and as 'the philosopher's philosopher'. "Asked what contemporary philosophers do, it would not be wildly wrong to say that they analyse Wittgenstein" (Danto 1990). Yet why has he not been introduced into archaeological theory – my own attempts apart! (Bintliff 1993, 1995, 1998). Well, he did not write about societies – present or past, but very much about the duty of the individual. On the other hand his life's work was

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to reconcile the way the world *is*, with the ways we talk about and react to or otherwise understand it, surely a fundamental theme for any approach to historical reconstruction and our task as archaeologists in confronting, describing and analysing past worlds.

### Biography and major ideas

Ludwig Wittgenstein was born in 1889 to one of the wealthiest business families in Habsburg Vienna. Rather unwillingly he followed parental encouragement by studying Engineering in England, but discovered his true vocation in Philosophy and went to study with Bertrand Russell in pre-World War I Cambridge. When war came he enlisted quickly, chiefly in the belief that the extreme closeness to death would test him to find his essential self.

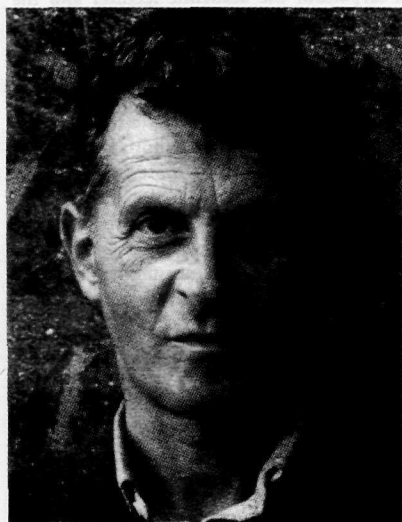


Fig. 1. Ludwig Wittgenstein.

He was a member of a generation that turned its back on 'old Europe' in favour of rigorous truth, functionalism and simplicity (its characteristic cultural products being the birth of modern art and architecture, Freud's revelations of the Mind and the philosophy of logical positivism). Despite an early commitment – hence the natural association with Russell – to mathematics and symbolic logic as the way to reduce philosophical speculations to clarity and order, he was increasingly driven by a need to enhance his spiritual yearnings through tying them to the order he sought in himself:

His logic and his thinking about himself being but two aspects of the single 'duty to oneself, this fervently held faith was bound to have an influence on his work.

And eventually it did – transforming it from an analysis of logical symbolism in the spirit of Frege and Russell into the curiously hybrid work which we know today, combining as it does logical theory with religious mysticism. (Monk 1990: 116)

The progression in this direction is already seen in his first major work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), whose aim was focused on simplifying the role of Philosophy and clarifying the way our words reflect the world around us. The influence of current scientific philosophy is apparent in the development of one major part of the ideas that later appeared in this book, ideas he developed during and immediately after World War I, and which were typified by his 'Picture Theory of Language'. While on the Eastern Front in the Austrian forces, Wittgenstein read a magazine reporting a Parisian car accident in which a model of the scene was presented before the court. This was a good illustration of his argument that a philosophical proposition is a model or picture of a state of affairs in the world, the actual structure of the proposition being a possible combination of elements in reality. The world consisted of facts, i.e. objects or things standing in certain relations to one another. In a way, he said, the saying of these everyday realities is a kind of unnecessary nonsense, as it would be clearer to point at them: saying and showing are contrasted, with logic reduced to tautology if true to the world, or contradictory nonsense if not. The propositions of logic are all tautologies or nonsense. All true fact-stating language can be analysed down into simple propositions that name these objects and make assertions about them whose logical structure corresponds to objective structures in reality.

John Tyerman Williams, in his entertaining, tongue-in-cheek introduction to *Western Philosophy*, as illustrated through the adventures of the famous fictional bear Winnie the Pooh, artfully summarises this stage of Wittgenstein's thought by reference to a linguistic confrontation between the erudite Owl and the commonsensical Pooh:

'Well,' said Owl, 'the customary procedure in such cases is as follows'.

'What does Crustimoney Proseedcake mean?' said Pooh. 'For I am a Bear of Very Little Brain, and long words Bother me.'

Owl proceeds:

'It means the Thing to Do.'

'As long as it means that, I don't mind,' said Pooh humbly. (Williams 1995: 108)

Fundamentally Wittgenstein argued that statements we make are either expressions of belief or ideology (in which case they cannot be further analysed, as equivalent to metaphysical sense perceptions), or reducible to 'pictures' of the real world (objects in relation to one another or 'states of affairs'). In both forms of expression we can clear up the confusion of language and philosophy, the 'meanings of things' by rapidly stripping down people's statements to either (a) a person making a metaphysical credo, or (b) a person trying with varying degrees of success to describe the sense scenario of objects in relation to each other (clearly the 'thing-language' of science was the best approximation to such a reality). For both uses of language Wittgenstein had the simple advice

"Don't think, look!" In a very conscious way, therefore, Wittgenstein had written a discardable book for a discardable discipline – philosophy had become unnecessary!

All this was highly acceptable to the rationalist positivists of Wittgenstein's Austrian associates in the Vienna Circle, and Russell, but they were astonished at the equal weight he gave to a very different set of complementary ideas in the *Tractatus*. Although always conscious of a mysticism within himself, Wittgenstein's daily exposure to death, suffering and misery during the war had heightened his intellectual concern with the place of metaphysics, together with the need to merge the personal and the philosophical. Ethics and logic, the two aspects of his 'duty to oneself' came together as key elements of the same philosophical work: "I know that this world exists. That I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field. That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning" (quoted in Monk 1990: 140-1). Amongst the key concepts linking the logic and the mysticism was the idea of the unutterable truth that makes itself manifest: "There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical" (quoted in Monk 1990: 156).

The same points are met again in the book's Preface: the whole meaning of the book "can be summed up as follows: What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent". And in a gloss on the book elsewhere: "the point of the book is ethical...my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one" (quoted in Monk 1990: 178). As the word-world is ultimately that of simple objects, all of value – religion, morality, is left out. Another example he introduced to illustrate this insight, was a poem by Uhland: a soldier while on crusade cuts a spray from a hawthorn bush; on return home he plants it and in old age sits beneath the shade of the fully grown hawthorn tree, which serves as a poignant reminder of his youth. The tale is told very simply without adornment and without drawing a moral. Of it Wittgenstein said: "And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost" (quoted in Monk 1990: 151). When he sometimes met with the logical positivists in Vienna in the 1920s, to their surprise he would suddenly turn his back on their discussions and read poetry. Later, teaching in Cambridge on Ethics, he said:

My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk on Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. (Quoted in Monk 1990: 277)

Compare this with the following passage from the *Tractatus*: "The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science – i.e. something which has

nothing to do with philosophy". And another, later comment from a Cambridge lecture: "What we find out in philosophy is trivial: it does not teach us new facts, only science does that" (both quoted in Monk 1990: 298).

After the war, Wittgenstein's family could not understand why he wanted to train as an elementary teacher. For Wittgenstein "the hardship suffered during the war was not experienced by him as something from which he sought refuge, but as the very thing that gave his life meaning. To shelter from the storm in the comfort and security which his family's wealth and his own education could provide would be to sacrifice everything he had gained from struggling with adversity...it was essential to Wittgenstein...not only that he should not use the privileges of his inherited wealth, but that he could not do so" (Monk 1990: 170-171). His father's legacy made him one of the wealthiest men in Europe but within a month of demobilisation he had disposed of his entire estate.

Wittgenstein entered the teaching profession with an idealistic set of intentions, such as working with the rural poor. Temperamentally he was unsuited, and he was also overoptimistic that local parents would let the brighter students leave local employment for distant academic training. In the end he was forced to leave the profession under a cloud, eventually finding his way back to Cambridge, where – after a failed attempt to emigrate to Soviet Russia as a labourer (they offered him a chair in Philosophy instead!) by the dawn of World War II he had become a Professor. During World War II Wittgenstein characteristically left Cambridge secretly to work as a volunteer laboratory technician in a London hospital. He died in Cambridge in 1951. Being a perfectionist always seeking a better understanding, all his later work remained unpublished at his death, including the second great volume, the *Philosophical Investigations*, which finally appeared in 1953.

In leaving academia for a country school, Wittgenstein had believed that in the *Tractatus* he had solved the problems of Philosophy, indeed demolished it as a discipline. However his maturer thinking made him realise that the original thesis was incomplete, and indeed wrong in critical areas. Solving these new problems occupied him passionately to the end of his life, and the posthumous volume presents these solutions. Whereas the *Tractatus* deals with language in isolation from the circumstances in which it is used, striving towards a logical atomism which pictures real things in 'states of affairs', the *Philosophical Investigations* repeatedly emphasises the importance of the 'stream of life' which gives linguistic utterances their meaning. Words are used for a particular purpose – the key thing is the use to which language is put. The point is to free ourselves from considering language in isolation from its place in the 'stream of life'. Problems cannot "be resolved by a *theory* of thinking. The only thing capable of clearing the fog" is to set the words at issue into "a form of life, a 'language-game', quite different from that of describing and explaining physical phenomena" (quoted in Monk 1990: 501). In this richer approach, language is embedded in human practices – it gets its meaning from

the various jobs it does in furthering forms of life. Different ways of discussing the world can now include imaginary or false understandings: the point is not their relation to the reality they describe – this is properly the job of scientific or ‘thing’ language, but the job the words serve within a particular kind of discourse or ‘language-game’ each with its own rules of performance, and each with a real-life role in the maintenance of our social and cultural life.

In his later work, although apparently rejecting his earlier publications, we can see Wittgenstein building on their insights to produce a more flexible approach. We might usefully remind ourselves of the ‘cars’ that represented a past scenario in court: *now*, when the models are being moved about to represent the world, Wittgenstein might have argued that (just as actually might occur in a trial), different people will offer variant interpretations of what is happening. He sees these different *discourses* as a range of games (*language-games*) or individual items in a *toolkit* (as if in a carpenter’s bag, for example). The separate language-games have different social roles to fulfill in society, and use the ‘objects in space/states of affairs’ flexibly for complementary purposes. Each discourse has its own vocabulary and rules of valid expression or performance for participants.

This last point is quite crucial in separating Wittgenstein’s view of the central role of language from a purely idealist position, where the world starts with language and is constituted from the implications of verbal symbols: for Wittgenstein all language is rooted in social behaviour, the main discourses or language-games having a functional role in the way people negotiate through life. Yet the language-games are not interchangeable, they serve different roles: constructing one game does not help you play the next. One does not justify a game but plays it, and if one can, one understands it (Monk 1990: 307). For Wittgenstein therefore there can be no theory of games – merely games, players, rules and their applications. The connection between a word and its meaning is to be found not in theory but in a practice.

It is essential to realise that Wittgenstein is far from proposing a relativistic view of reality, in fact he always grounds these discourses in the world of public, perceived action (a point also made by Curry [1991] in a review of the influence of postmodernism in geographical theory, stressing that Wittgensteinian discourses are ‘forms of life’). If someone performs within ideological/ metaphysical discourse, they are expressing a transcendental sense perception to other listeners in a specific real time and place. As remarked earlier, it is entirely inappropriate to mix such a discourse with the ‘thing-language game’ of science, whose task it is to parameterise ‘objects in space’ in technical ways. Wittgenstein claims, I think rightly, that ‘hidden mental states’ are inaccessible to discussion or analysis, so that the world works and is interpretable only through social action – either language, symbolism or other non-verbal behaviour.

And since so much of importance in our social communication *is* in the unutterable realm of ethics, religion and the senses, gestures and physical responses are often more important than 'saying', i.e. showing: "If you and I are to live religious lives, it mustn't be that we talk about religion, but that our manner of life is different" (quoted in Monk 1990: 305). *Not* "In the beginning was the Word" but rather from Goethe's *Faust* "Am Anfang war die Tat" (in the beginning was the *act*) might be considered a motto for the whole of his later philosophy (Monk 1990: 306). The framework of a discourse cannot of itself be justified or proven correct – the natural science explanation apart – but it provides the limits – the rules – within which justification and proof take place. And frameworks change, but our need to deal with the world through them does not.

What is immediately clear is how each of the many alternative ways of looking at or talking about the world, utilises differing means to describe and analyse what is going on, differing ways of evaluating a strong and a weak argument within its chosen position. Wittgenstein very influentially deployed the word 'discourse' to identify the particular ways each separate approach develops its own appropriate forms of language, methodology and modes of verification or criticism. This is why to portray the complementarity of discourses he adopted the image of a plumber, or carpenter, who comes to a job with a large bag full of many tools. On inspecting the task, he searches within his 'toolkit' for the right implement.

We are all familiar with the simplest illustration of these insights. A sceptical scientist stands in his laboratory and challenges the theologian to bring God to the laboratory bench so that His substance (and existence!) can be tested chemically. Experiencing God, replies the theologian, is never done through your methodology. According to Wittgenstein, who was a very spiritual person himself, metaphysical matters are a kind of discourse that it is even otiose to talk about rather than 'show' and 'express'. The tools of science, said Wittgenstein, are just the job for studying certain properties of the world – what can usefully be talked about in the discourse he called 'thing-language'; but they are irrelevant to as many other areas of our experience, where we need different and complementary discourses. There is nothing incompatible with one and the same person being a laboratory scientist, a Marxist, Jewish, politically active, an objective and a subjective person. It is only nonsense-producing, when that person tries to use these *personae* at one and the same time, rather than separating off the discourse they are engaged in and following the current rules, terms, debate and action appropriate to that discourse.

All of this frees us from the now pointless urge to reduce the different ways of seeing the world to a single grammar or analysis, such as is typified by traditional philosophical exercises on themes like 'What is knowledge?' or 'What is time?' For Wittgenstein, these are grammatical errors practised by philosophers trying to merge the unmergeable variant discourses: doubts which

do not occur to ordinary people but do to philosophers simply show the misunderstandings of the latter.

To give an example of a discourse appropriately distinct from others – Wittgenstein chose Aesthetics (cf. Monk 1990: 405). Wittgenstein argued that it was a pointless logical debate to address the question ‘what is beauty?’ when nothing can be done using verbal analysis. More often than not, he explained, the appreciation of beauty takes the form of certain gestures of disgust or satisfaction, just as the way we play music or read poetry reveals our sensitivity to its beauty. Compare his moving insight:

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For ‘consciousness of sin’ is a real event and so are despair and salvation through faith. Those who speak of such things (Bunyan for instance) are simply describing what has happened to them. (Quoted in Monk 1990: 376)

In a startling and influential aphorism, Wittgenstein summed up the implications of his theory of language-games in this way: “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (quoted in Monk 1990: 548).

As a conclusion to our brief review of the man and his achievement, we can do no better than cite the words of Wittgenstein’s biographer, Ray Monk, explaining his own purpose in writing that excellent and moving biography: “to make it clear how this work comes from this man, to show...the unity of his philosophical concerns with his emotional and spiritual life” (Monk 1990: xviii). Arthur Danto, reviewing Monk’s *magnum opus*, was driven to describe Wittgenstein as experiencing a religious kind of ascetic and penitent life – “this exemplary, almost awesome life, with its fierce moral beauty and relentless artistic drive” (Danto 1990). Figure 1, a photograph of Wittgenstein, seems to express these moving qualities in a single image, as we seem to look into his open soul.

### Wittgenstein and Archaeological Theory<sup>1</sup>

A rehearsal of the old antagonisms between New Archaeology and the post-processual programme is unproductive, if not tiresome, and it does not seem to me to be taking us anywhere. Why don’t all sides to the debate admit, what probably seems rather obvious to a dispassionate observer from outside of the discipline, that there are very good ideas and approaches in both traditions. On this basis we should be seeking to create a *genuinely* ‘open’ discipline, utilising the tested strengths and potentials of *all* the ways to the Past that have been developed since the 1960s (and indeed before that), to recreate a richer and

<sup>1</sup> Parts of this section of the paper have already appeared in Bintliff 1998.

more varied understanding of previous societies and of ourselves as social scientists with a 'back-looking curiosity'.

You will respond perhaps with other commentators – that it can't be done, that the post-processual movement had to part company with processualism because their views and methodologies were in fundamental opposition, and that attempts at a synthesis merely produce unconvincing farragos of jarring contradictions.

Enter *Ludwig*. Those of you familiar with my recent contributions to the processual *v.* post-processual debate will know that I consider this philosopher to have provided a highly original and surprisingly simple solution to these conflicts and contradictions. It allows you quite legitimately and through a process of justified reasoning to be both a processualist *and* a post-processualist – without sacrificing your commitment to treasured standpoints associated with each position. On the other hand it challenges both sides to become more open-minded, more pluralistic, than either has shown a willingness to be, and it frees the student of archaeology from the processes of ideological conformity to which I can assure you many are presently being subjected to on both sides of the divide.

As we have just seen, according to Ludwig, the entire history of philosophy has been a rather pointless quarrel over matters such as the precise definition of concepts, the squabble between 'idealists' and 'materialists' as to which was the right way to see the world, and so forth – none of which has ever been resolved or brought closer to resolution. Cutting the Gordian Knot of two and a half millennia of non-progressive argument, Wittgenstein prefers to focus our attention on what actually happens when 'thinkers' in general, but of varied persuasions, talk and write about some aspect of the world around them. A school we might characterise as highly 'hard science' or positivistic would approach the situation under study using measuring devices, analytical software programmes, they would like to portray the situation ideally using a logarithm, a graphic model, or in fashionable non-parametric science (e.g. Chaos Theory – see Bintliff 1997) – as a dynamic constellation of observations moving in and out of structure and structurelessness. Another school – for example that of phenomenologists, would in contrast approach the same situation under study by attempting to recreate the sensory experience and associations within the ambience concerned, through personal reconstructive immersion in the physical world of the context and an imaginative recapitulation of the social or ritual emotive worlds. Again, a researcher with a strong personal commitment to a proselytising ideology such as Christianity or Marxism would focus on those aspects of the scenario where personal revelation and metaphysical, spiritual forces were perceptible, or where economic structuralism was a potent force, respectively.

I would defend the necessary autonomy of these discourses in their task of producing results in their own terms. The fact is that you can, and most often do, approach an archaeological findspot as a field archaeologist with the aim of

describing its properties in the neutral 'thing-language' of science. That behaviour will not guide you in the least if you want to think, and act, on how you should relate what you find at that site to the needs of the modern surrounding population. When you write up the site, you will be sensible and prepare a technical publication for other field archaeologists, and another publication for constructing a meaningful dialogue with local communities. This much is plain from the parable of Çatalhöyük – where Ian Hodder's presentation of the site in lectures and articles is a discourse of aestheticism observing the field archaeologists from outside, in stark contrast with the first volume of the excavation (Hodder 1996) – a textbook publication of positivistic field archaeology prepared by the professional, 'thing-discourse' technicians that Ian so intelligently employs to do his practical work (cf. Hassan 1997). It is really so simple, Ian, to say that these approaches are doing very different jobs, each as interesting, one processualist, the other post-processual, and infinitely preferable to persisting in trying to erect an umbrella of postmodern anarchic subjectivity over everything and everybody. We need both viewpoints, but what they do is incommensurable, yet essential and complementary, for a more open-minded archaeology of the next millennium.

Of course in order to maintain the Wittgensteinian thesis, I have to challenge one widely-stated view, that every approach is inseparable from every other, so that, for instance, a non-political act of investigation is an impossibility. I consider such statements as mere assertions which act as unquestioned propaganda for promoting a favoured approach, and as has been clearly shown by many critics of this position, produces a self-defeating logic. If I say that every decision made by an archaeologist is political and never objective, but I also believe there is no 'right' narrative or single voice to be privileged, then I too can only spout a subjective political ideology at you, nor do I deserve more attention than any other, equally biased archaeologist, unless you share my political stance in the first place. In the real world (as opposed to 'Seminarworld') there is a wide gulf that is easily maintained by a conscious decision to do so, between being open to models from any direction, and having a political argument with a fellow-archaeologist. Find your historic or prehistoric database – a site or region – this does not commit you to being branded politically (!), and use the 'thing language' tools to uncover an elaborate database. At the same time, if you *wish to*, in a different discourse, ask yourself what politically interesting questions can be addressed with your database, stating your affiliations and motivation and your practical hopes of changing the world from the trenches concerned (*sic*). At the moment of writing this, I am devoting the major part of my research time to the study of Classical manuring evidence in the Boeotia Project database: I challenge *anyone* to deconstruct that politically.

A final pair of questions remains. Firstly, if we accept the autonomy of the separate approaches or discourses, does this not also open the floodgates – which now it seems both processualists and post-processualists fear – of total

relativism? If all opinions were accepted as viable, it would be only right and proper that in future archaeology lecturers should give equal lecture time to propounding the readings of the Past expressed by Von Däniken or Henri Le Pen, Uncle Alf the White Witch or Barbara Cartland, with equal patience and seriousness, all the time preventing their students from applying judgemental criticism.

The way Wittgenstein conceived of a 'discourse' is as a major form of dynamic debate focussed on a particular way of understanding the world, but a debate that has developed its own internal critique and standards, its own criteria for effective argument. We take Chris Tilley's experiencing of megalithic and related monuments seriously because his phenomenology (Tilley 1994) is a great deal more thought-out than earlier acts of imaginative reconstruction, such as Collingwood's thought-experiments about Caesar's motivations on campaign from a comfortable armchair in an Oxford college (Bintliff 1988, contra Hodder 1986).

If we accept these penetrating ideas from someone widely considered to be the greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, what are the direct implications for archaeology? Let us collapse the generational antagonisms and the millennial idealist-rationalist polarity into a series of complementary *discourses, language-games, or a toolkit*. The history of archaeology clearly reveals a series of ways of looking at the past which have fluctuated in favour and popularity, and which now deserve a place in a constellation of major discourses appropriate to a pluralistic discipline. These discourses can further be justified through comparison with related disciplines and their constellations:

- *A science discourse* – characteristic for most archaeological activity is the revealing, measuring and describing of past human 'states of affairs' in 'thing' language
- *A biological discourse* – from the beginning of archaeology as a serious discipline in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, there has existed a discourse viewing human activity from a human biological, adaptive, and more recently a human ecological perspective
- *A functionalist discourse* – past human behaviour can be comprehended through a perspective derived from traditional social anthropology, in which human actions are moulded by adaptive selection favouring the maintenance of communal social structures
- *A culturalist discourse* – never absent from archaeological interpretation but variable in popularity is the approach in which human behaviour is primarily controlled through a distinctly human cultural repertoire (verbal, symbolic pictures of the world)
- *A political discourse* – Human behaviour, past and present, can be discussed within the language game of formal political positions and stated ideologies (e.g. Marxism, feminism)

- *A religious discourse* – Our approach to past societies can be analysed as evidence of forms of engagement with supernatural beings or forces.

The second question still to be answered following an acceptance of a Wittgensteinian perspective, concerns the act of synthesis in archaeological interpretation. If Wittgensteinian discourses are ultimately incommensurate, what kind of narrative, if any, could ever be given for a past society? Maybe, you will say, narratives are outmoded and unrealistic at the grand scale. But what if we ask instead, a more problem-orientated question: Why did a certain process occur, or not occur? Then it might seem that all we can do in language-game terms, is post the question to a series of separate rooms, in each of which a group of researchers representing the major discourses or approaches will produce their state-of-the-art answer, leaving us with a variety of explanations or reactions that do not support or contradict each other – simply do not talk to each other at all. I must confess that this weakness in Wittgenstein's Solution puzzled me for a long time, although I remained convinced that he had signposted the only correct way to make a virtue out of the antagonistic diversity within current archaeological theory.

The answer to this paradox came to me through my interest in Annaliste or 'Braudelian' structural history (Bintliff 1991). The classic French *Annales* historians have argued that any historical scenario is an unpredictable conjunction of historic forces operating at differing timescales and through differing media: processes completed in a year or a generation, perhaps, and often highly cognised – processes occurring over many generations or centuries, and inadequately if at all within the active consciousness of contemporary historical actors – finally extremely long-term and generally uncognised processes stretching over millennia or tens of millennia. These processes can work in highly diverse ways – the impact on forms of land use of a diffusing technology or suite of new crops, the transformation of economics associated with the Protestant work ethic, and so on. Historical (and hence prehistorical) events, trends, are thus an unplanned conjunction and unpredictable interactive network of 'incommensurable' factors or forces. Yet these events and trends were real 'outcomes'. Likewise, it now seems admitted by most participants in historical and archaeological debates about interpretation of the past, that explanations have to be created using many different voices, methods, kinds of information. It would be a mistake to believe that any one discourse can offer, in advance, the dominant factor that drives a particular past event or trend – if any *one* factor is ever likely to do anyway. Rather we can expect to want to listen to the weight each discourse can contribute in accounting for the particular features of a given past situation, before trying to describe an interactive structure incorporating the most convincing 'players' and which approximates most closely to the observed scenario.

From this argument I believe a strong case can be made for challenging most current archaeological theoretical positions with privileging *a priori*

explanations. For example the model of adaptation favoured by ecological archaeologists begins by assuming that fundamentally any trend is gravitationally trapped into a best-fit survival strategy, whilst the 'social actor' model in vogue with post-processualists assumes that the form of a society is largely controlled through the conscious acts of individual members of that society. I see all such philosophies as *assertions* that at best are merely *models*, whose only value is to stand alongside a battery of quite different models and demonstrate their explanatory power in accounting for selected features of the archaeological scenario under review. It would now be *expected* that one prehistoric/historic scenario could be reconstructed with a very different constellation of major players than the next one. This is rather taxing for us to have to be so truly open to the unexpected, and even the unwelcome, theory or model. So be it! It would also mean that theoretical archaeologists would be encouraged to read, *open-mindedly*, in Foucault, Derrida and Freud, Jung, Darwin, Stephen Jay Gould, Braudel, Teilhard de Chardin, Nietzsche (and of course... Wittgenstein).



## Comment

### Poetics and Politics

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There is much to admire in John Bintliff's paper, just as there is much to admire in the philosophy of Wittgenstein. It lies beyond question that the latter was one of the most important modern philosophers, and we can certainly agree that his ideas have considerable relevance for archaeology. None the less, there are some elements of the argument presented here which I think deserve further consideration.

The first of these concerns language. The later Wittgenstein's work on language is rich and subtle, but Bintliff concentrates on two particular aspects of his arguments: the 'picture theory' and the social context of words in 'language games'. The former holds that the world is composed of facts, and enjoins us to point to them rather than speak them. This of course implies that the things which surround us are unproblematic and self-evident; our problems only begin when we start to talk about things. This is not quite a representational theory of language (*sensu* Taylor 1985: 249), but it does suggest that language is at its most useful when it is being representational. Metaphysics is nonsense, and language is effective when words are simply representations of the things that they refer to. However, language does a great deal more than simply allowing us to communicate concepts in ways which are comparable with the showing of an image. Language does not merely represent, convey or describe. Language is also constitutive: it makes a particular kind of social being possible. It enables human beings to engage in conversation, creating new insights in the process, and it articulates and formulates ideas (Taylor 1992). When we formulate something, we may be struggling to find out what we think, only coming to the answer at the end of the process (Taylor 1985: 258). It is the way in which words work constructively, creating new meanings and new perceptions as we play with them which is the foundation of poetics; this is a point to which I will return.

Most importantly of all, language is never just a means of describing entities which we already understand in a non-linguistic way before we choose to express them in words. Quite the opposite: language enables the world to be disclosed to us. Human beings operate in an intersubjective space, a horizon of

intelligibility which we call 'the world' (Heidegger 1962: 91). This world provides the condition of the possibility of things making sense to us, and it is constituted in and through language. When things 'show up' to us, they do so as meaningful entities rather than as raw sense data. They are disclosed as something or other: a house, a chair, a doormat. The intelligibility of these things is conditioned by the network of relationships of sense and meaning which make up the world. In other words, the background or context which renders things comprehensible is a public sphere constituted by language.

According to Bintliff, Wittgenstein distinguished rigidly between facts which can be reduced to pictures, and beliefs, of which we cannot speak at all without lapsing into nonsense. The word-world is a world of simple objects, from which spiritual values are absent. The problem of 'the inexpressible' is one which Martin Heidegger also addressed, in a rather different way. For him, the world is not composed of bare objects, but of meaning and significance. Yet there are things which resist and withdraw from our comprehension. These things – the earth and the deities – cannot be pinned down by language, and yet it is the task of poetry to 'take the measure' of what cannot be said (Heidegger 1971: 215). Far from stopping short at the description of mere things, we can use words poetically to express the inexhaustibility of that which cannot be spoken. Heidegger talks of poetry as a kind of letting-dwell, a way of existing in humility before the things which we cannot understand. This relationship with things provides a foundation for our own stay on earth.

It seems to me that this conception of the poetic is one which has some relevance for archaeologists. After all, we spend much of our time talking about things which are in the full sense unknowable. We write about the past in the present, and in the process attempt to understand the lives of people who are now dead. Being historically and culturally distant from ourselves, there is much about these lives that lies beyond our experience. Perhaps an archaeological poetics which attempts to 'take the measure' of this difference would allow us to open up a relationship with the past which involves a proper degree of reverence?

Bintliff's emphasis on the social context of language-use is welcome. However, the distinction which he sets up between visible social action and 'hidden' mental states is more problematic, suggesting as it does a dichotomy between mind and body. The 'problem of other minds' rests on the assumption that human beings are biological organisms which exist alongside each other, but possess minds which are inaccessible to each other (Glendinning 1998: 9). So humans are knowing subjects which are present only to themselves. Once we break down the mind/body dichotomy this problem starts to dissolve (Ingold 1998). Human beings always exist in a world, and even thinking is a practice which takes place in a worldly context. It is not the case that an absent mind directs a body from a distance, as a real intelligence behind a fleshly mask. Even when people seek to deceive each other, it is unhelpful to conceive

what is going on in terms of a mind plotting in the distance and a body acting as if unaware. Deception is itself a practice which is embedded in social life.

The final major issue which Bintliff raises concerns the simultaneous existence of a number of different discourses, each of which has a different purpose. Even within a single discipline, there may be a series of separate language-games at work, and these may be complementary and incommensurate. I am sympathetic to this argument, not simply because there are scientific, cultural, functionalist, biological, political and religious discourses within archaeology, but also because there are distinct regional and national communities of archaeologists with their own traditions of inquiry. These, I believe, cannot always be subsumed under global headings of 'culture-historical', 'processual' or 'post-processual' archaeology. I do not think that different archaeologies could or should be reduced to a single common framework of belief and practice, agreeing about what we should study and how we should study it. But on the other hand I am not sure that these separate traditions or discourses plough their own furrow unaffected by each other's activities. Rather, it is possible for different archaeologies to enter into a dialogue which is mutually enriching, without surrendering their identities. Despite the acrimony which it has generated, it is arguable that both sides have been strengthened by the processual/post-processual debate, without either having been proved 'right' or 'wrong'. Whether different discourses produce explanations at different levels, as Bintliff suggests, I am less sure. Certainly, different approaches give us different perspectives on any set of evidence. I would compare this to looking at the different facets of a crystal and seeing different views of the overall structure. But by invoking Braudel's hierarchy of levels Bintliff implies that some forms of interpretation are more 'fundamental', providing answers which are more profound or far-reaching.

I am also unconvinced by Bintliff's claim that the 'thing-language' of excavation is neutral and non-political, given his admission that all language use is embedded in the 'stream of life'. There are no neutral technologies, since all techniques are realised through everyday power relations. Excavation is a case in point: from the micropower relationships between excavators, to project design and the negotiations between developer-funders and field units, there is always power and strategy. What I would deny is that there is any clear distinction between these micro-politics and the politics of social movements, parties and states. It is not simply that we always go into the field with a series of implicit and explicit research objectives in mind, which are influenced by our prejudices and assumptions. What we can and cannot do at any point is constrained and facilitated by a tangle of circumstances, which actually condition the kind of evidence which we will produce.



## Response

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I would like to thank Julian for his interesting comments on my chapter, and in particular welcome the numerous points of agreement which emerge and which, along with signs elsewhere in current theoretical discussion, could indicate a growing flexibility in debate in contrast to the supposed antagonism between the various schools of archaeological theory (e.g. positivistic, Darwinian, idealist).

Next I would like to clarify a few misunderstandings in Julian's commentary (quite possibly due to the necessarily compressed nature of my account). Wittgenstein in his early works did not consider metaphysics to be nonsense (indeed quite the opposite), merely nonsense to try and talk about in a logical or philosophical fashion. Although Julian goes on to suggest that Heidegger made an improvement on this through advocating a poetics of the inexpressible, this non-philosophical positioning of the Arts as an essential complement to logical uses of language is exactly what Wittgenstein proposed in his early works (recall his use of poetry to signal the limitations of the Vienna Circle of logical positivists), and developed more fully in his later philosophy. The greater potential of Wittgenstein's position is however to characterise the poetic discourse as only one in the toolkit of our participation in the stream of life, alongside others such as the 'thing language' of science. Julian, it seems to me, is in danger of mental myopia in focussing narrowly on one tool from the kit – reverence for the inexpressible aspects of the past, whilst ignoring the richer insights obtainable if he were to bring a wider bag of approaches to archaeological investigation.

In discussing the unknowability of other minds, I think that once again Julian misconstrues Wittgenstein's intentions. The latter was not giving a view on the mind-body dualism debate, but rather suggesting that it is of little importance for the way the world actually works – and hence for our attempts to comprehend the world. We as humans live in social contexts and act and react from those visible forms of communication we observe in those we come into contact with – although these go well beyond mere words and can include physical gestures and expressions. What is going on in the minds of those around us may or may not be identical to the signals they send to us, but since

life in the world consists of 'states of affairs' where discourses are maintained through these public communications, the essential lines of past, present and future social life are created 'in full view' of discourse participants.

Julian's comments on the *Annales'* approach of structural history perpetuates a common misunderstanding. The *Annales'* historians have argued that particular historical scenarios are the product of factors and influences operating at different timescales (short, medium and long), and through different media (e.g. environmental or technological change, shifts in mentalities, or in forms of artistic representation, etc.). Often, if not generally, this produces a complexity of causation beyond the capacity of contemporaries (the historical actors) to comprehend. Moreover, since the multi-factor nature of historic scenarios implies the impossibility of monocausal determinism, we should agree with Stephen Jay Gould that interpretation of the past can be postdiction but never prediction. Amongst *Annales'* historians, the interpretations of weighting to be given to individual historical forces has, naturally, varied. Braudel, in his famous monograph on the Mediterranean in the age of Philip II (Braudel 1972-1973), argued for the triumph of those forces at work beyond an individual lifetime, but other notable *Annalistes*, especially the 'poetic' narrative historian Le Roy Ladurie, have published classic histories emphasising the critical role of individuals and short-term factors. In this light, Julian's charge that the *Annales'* hierarchy of levels implies interpretative value is unfounded. In the same way, the Wittgensteinian – and my – position on complementary discourses is in no way arguing for preferential value in any discourse, rather it is exactly what Julian means when he refers to "different facets of a crystal...seeing different views of the overall structure" (p. 168).

Two final comments. Firstly, Wittgenstein liberated us from our obsession with language as the 'constructor of life', by emphasising how important non-verbal communication is in our social interactions. This is a fine way to remind contemporary theorists that we are active physical beings as well as verbal machines. To take Julian's example of the chair only becoming such to us through social naming, in reality – like so much of learning about the world – objects such as this are defined in early childhood by our physical placing in chairs and our observation of their use by others. Chimpanzees 'know socially' what a chair is, and learn quickly how to mimic human use, without needing to know the linguistic label.

Lastly, Julian's final paragraph reiterates the common view that politics is everything, everything is politics. This is rather a good example where discourse theory clears up muddled thinking. Julian is very interested in political discourse, and wants to see how that way of seeing the world sheds light on it. Fine, but 'is that all there is?' Hardly. It is true that aeroplanes were invented by White Western males, and not by Africans, but the intrinsic value of the technology in the 'thing language' of science is not reducible to the political discourse about the unequal development of Third World countries. I do not

mind at all, and rather enjoy, talking political archaeology, but believe we have to open our intellectual 'toolbags' much wider to stimulate complementary discussions in other discourses; in fact Julian's poetics is a very good example of that.

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