Articles

Wittgenstein and Thoreau (and Cavell): The Ordinary Weltanschauung

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I

For a long time I had been able to resist Cavell's pressure on me to turn to Thoreau in order to look for an "underwriting" of ordinary language philosophizing. Finally, however, my working at reading Wittgenstein - in particular at reading *Philosophical Investigations* 109-133 - forced me to reconsider my resistance. The remark that finally sent me from *Philosophical Investigations* to *Walden* was *PI* 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'?)

The parenthetical question that ends this remark began to bother me: Why did Wittgenstein ask the question? Did he intend the question to be answered "Yes" or "No"? (Did he intend the question to be answered at all?)

The problem against which I read the question was the problem of defending ordinary language philosophy from various attacks, but especially from the flank attack that charges ordinary language philosophy with being "trivial," "flat," with "turning its back on the traditional questions and mission of philosophy." This charge struck me as wrong-headed, but also as exceptionally hard to resist. After all, ordinary language philosophy, if it has any dealings of any sort with 'Weltanschauung', looks to be a (the?) style of philosophy that repudiates the Weltanschauung.

Eventually, I retreated to the sentence that prefaces the question, and began to turn it over. The word that caught my attention was 'account'. This is Thoreau's word, the word that he used to describe *Walden*. The question then struck me: What if Thoreau's "underwriting" of the work of Wittgenstein (and of Austin) could be understood as his helping to provide an answer to the question "Is this a 'Weltanschauung'?"

I do not want to try to front this question immediately. Instead I want to wander around in its vicinity for a little while, to see what I can find.

II

In a well-known passage in *Walden*, Thoreau writes:

> Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, . . . through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a *point d'appui* . . .

Reading this passage recalls a couple of key passages in *Philosophical Investigations:*

> What has to be accepted, the given, is - so one could say - *forms of life* (226).

> If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do." (217).

Wittgenstein notes that at the bottom of justifications, there is something that is bedrock, something hard enough to turn his spade. Whenever he reaches bedrock, he is *inclined* to say - "This is simply what I do." His reason for reporting his inclination is to make it clear that whatever he says at that point, after his spade's turning, is going to be something he is (only) inclined to say, not something he has to say or even something he says: If he were to say something, his inclination would be to say "This is simply what I do." I take Wittgenstein to call this an inclination because he wants to deflect the tendency most would have to reach bedrock and then to say "QED," as though something had been proven, or to shout "This is simply what I do" as if it were a challenge. But bedrock is reached *after* "the justifications" have been exhausted. The bedrock proves nothing; it only provides a place to stop, rough ground on which to walk.

What is at bottom? What is bedrock? I think that the passage from *PI* 226 gives the answer, namely that bedrock is a form of life. As I understand the term 'form of life', it primarily refers to "something animal" (*OC* 359), not to some idiosyncratic way of living, or even to some culture or some culture's set of practices. A form of life is a particular type of creature, some kind of living thing.

This is not as arbitrary an assertion as it might seem. As Putnam has rightly pointed out, 217 is phrased in terms of what "*I* have exhausted . . . ," what has happened to "*my* spade," what "*I* am inclined to say . . . " and what "*I* do."[1] If bedrock were to be understood as the practices of a culture, then Wittgenstein's emphasis on himself would be misplaced. Noting this about the passage gives rise to a different problem, however. Perhaps Wittgenstein, by placing the emphasis on himself, is suggesting that his bedrock and someone else's might be located at different strata. Again, though, the phrasing of the passage makes this reading troublesome: Wittgenstein does not say "I have exhausted *my* justifications" nor does he assert that the bedrock he reaches is *his* bedrock. The clear route through the *ipsissima verba* of the passage then looks to be the one I want to take, the one that sees Wittgenstein as having struck bottom at his form of life, to have struck bottom at being human.[2]

Bedrock is a particular creature, hence a particular creature's nature; for Wittgenstein, in *PI* 217, human nature is bedrock. By 'human nature' I do not mean 'human essence' - something unchanging and atemporal, a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that every human being is supposed to satisfy. By 'human nature' I mean those activities that typify human beings as we know them, those that are the ordinary features of a *human* life in *this* world; those that are more than idiosyncracies (a taste for blood sausage, a love for Barbara Cartland novels, etc.) and less than purely biological compulsions (the pumping of the heart, breathing, eating, etc.). The activities I am concerned with are those that would be the fit subject matter of a natural history of human beings. And this is how Wittgenstein describes his philosophical activity (in *PI* 415): "What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings."

What does all of this have to do with Thoreau? Well, in one way the answer is pretty obvious, in another less so. I want to take up the question in the latter way. In the chapter "Economy," Thoreau writes that he went to the woods in order to "learn what are the gross necessaries of life." He goes on to explain that by 'necessaries of life' he means

> whatever . . . has been from the first, or from long use has become, so important to human life that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it.

The "necessaries" Thoreau has in mind here - as the rest of the chapter makes clear - are less those we share with the brutes than those we (ought to) share with other human beings, things he will describe in the next chapter as the things he "lived for." ("We crave only reality").

Thoreau has been called the inventor of the natural history essay, and it is this way of thinking of *Walden* that I am trying to exploit.[3] The type of description Thoreau provides, a description of the "necessaries of [human] life," is a description, I think, of what Wittgenstein calls the human "form of life." That is, *Walden* can be understood as Thoreau's remarks on the natural history of human beings. All of Thoreau's talk of "Nature" has blinded some to the fact that the nature that Thoreau is most concerned to describe and to understand in *Walden* is his nature, our nature - human nature.

As an aid to unpacking some of those overstuffed sentences, recall that one of the recurrent themes of *Walden* is that "men labor under a mistake." Throughout the book, Thoreau proposes "disfutations" (to use O.K. Bouwsma's word) of the mistakes men labor under: Thoreau does not try to refute the mistakes, he tries to overwhelm them, to rid them of their appeal. The mistakes Thoreau disfutes are the type better forgotton, better left behind, than rebutted; the type of mistakes we can with effort shed, like the misconceptions of childhood. (What Thoreau here calls a "mistake," Wittgenstein will later call, more aptly, a "superstition" (*PI* 110)).

The mistake that the book takes aim at again and again is the mistake of thinking of human beings as creatures set over and against Nature. Thoreau wants us to come to see ourselves a right; to "regard man as an inhabitant, or part and parcel of Nature . . . "One of the important facts about human beings is that we have a tendency to bargain our nature

away: We tend to impute our activities and skills and accomplishments to the tools we use: We say that "scissors cut," when it is we who do the cutting; we claim that our vehicles "take us where we want to go," when it is we who do the driving; we describe books as "saying something," when it is the author who does the talking; we maintain that words "have meanings," or refer to things," when it is we who mean things and we who refer to things. This ability to regard our nature as foreign to us - this "doubleness"; this "standing beside ourselves in a sane sense" - keeps us from being "wholly involved in Nature," keeps us from being wholly involved in our nature.

In "Walking," Thoreau describes himself as suffering from this "doubleness":

> But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is, - I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses.

The work of *Walden,* as I read it, is summed up in these lines. Thoreau's retreat from the village to the pond - his walk from one to the other - is an attempt to return to his senses.[4] Thoreau's reparation to the woods can be taken as symbolic of his return to his body, of his reinhabiting his body. Hence his concern with habitation, with settlements, becomes his way of provoking concern for *occupying* the body; it becomes his way of tempting us into a whole involvement with our nature.[5]

The concern Thoreau wants to provoke is not a fetish for the body, or things bodily, nor is it a call to glorify, or revel in, the body. Both of these require precisely what Thoreau wants us to forego - "doubleness." Both require a sort of "separation" from the body, a holding of it at arm's length; both require us to take notice of the body. The concern Thoreau wants to provoke is instead a concern compatible with, perhaps best expressed in, being unmindful of the body. (Note that this is not the same as neglecting ir ot being forgetful of it.) What I mean is that Thoreau wants us to return to our senses, to our body, and to return with a sense of homecoming. Our home is the place where we are at home; it is the place we can be with no sense of being anywhere. It is the place where we are comfortable. And the mark of comfortable clothing is my lack of awareness that I am wearing it. Thus, Thoreau wants to provoke us to concern with the body, to return us to where it is, to lead us home. Coming to see the body as home is not to pant after it, nor to glorify it, but rather to settle into it, to become comfortable in it, to eventually let go of awareness of it; it is to see embodiment as ordinary. (For most of us, the body is too much or too little with us for embodiment to be seen as ordinary.)

III

My dwelling on the body will, I hope, be excused. I did it in order to make clearer some of the things involved in looking at *Walden* as I do and also to provide a perspective from which to consider the passage from *Walden* that began Section II. How should that passage be understood? Like this, I think: What Thoreau calls "a hard bottom" is human nature. His "*point d'appui*," the stopping-place, is the type of creature we are.

Consider the potential ambiguity of the term 'human nature'. Above I treated it as a term for whatever activities typify human beings as we know them. It might also be taken as a term for the nature that humans find or that they observe - Nature seen through human eyes. I want to suggest that there is no actual ambiguity in 'human nature'; it is because both ways of taking the term end up coming to the same thing that Thoreau can treat human nature as a hard bottom, as reality. For Thoreau, the Nature we know is our nature.

In "Experience," Emerson notes that "we can only say what we are." It is this tie-up between what we say (or know) and what we are that Thoreau wants us to admit. I can make this a little less obscure by turning to a couple of passages in *Philosophical Investigations*:

> *Essence* is expressed by grammar. (371)

> Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.) (373)

These passages seem mystifying. I think that they need not be. It is tempting to understand the passages to be saying something much stronger and much more controversial than they are, something like "*Essence* is created by grammar" and "Grammar makes anything into the kind of object it is." Taking the passages this way makes it necessary to grapple with nightmarish questions of linguistic idealism. These questions can be avoided, will be avoided, if we pay attention to the wording of the passages. 371 notes that essence "is *expressed by* grammar" and 373 that grammar "tells us *what kind of object* anything is." These are really fairly pedestrian remarks. To see this, imagine talking to a blind man about colors. Imagine asking him "Have you tasted any brown lately?" Do you think he will answer? Does the fact that he is blind make him unable to recognize the question as nonsense? Does the fact that he has never seen brown render him incompetent to judge whether it can be tasted? The point is that his acquaintance with color talk, with color terms, has told him what kind of objects colors are. Though he has not seen and may never see something brown, he knows that brown cannot be tasted. He knows, we might say, something about the essence of colors; he knows something about the possibilities of color (*PI* 90.) Thus, in *PI* 371 and 373 Wittgenstein tells us something about the way language - our nature - and Nature are bound up with one another, and that in turn tells us something about the way what we know and what we are bound up with one another. What human beings know something to be, their experience of it, is shown by the ways they talk about it and vice versa.[6] (In the end, there is only a mock- formal distinction between the two; we cannot prize them apart.[7]) And the way we talk is a function of what we are: Our grammar tells us what kind of creature we are.

My suggestion that human nature is reality for Thoreau, that it is what he calls the "hard bottom," should be easier to understand when seen in light of *PI* 371 and 373. The response to my suggestion that seems most likely to me is that, if I am right, then Thoreau has abandoned us in (to?) human nature and has made (non-human) Nature some kind of thing-in-itself, something we cannot reach.

This response springs from the idea that to say that our nature is the only Nature we can know is to say that human nature sets us (that is, we humans) limits, that we are

confined by it, confined in it. But this is the wrong way of responding to my suggestion.[8] What could it mean to me to be told that I cannot experience what a human being cannot experience? Would this be news to me - even interesting gossip? How can I be *denied* a non-human experience? While I can imagine what it *might be like* to be lion, I cannot imagine being one. (Wittgenstein: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him." [223]) I cannot be abandoned someplace, or trapped there, when there is no place (else) to go. A form of Butler's remark pretty much captures the thought: Human beings are what they are and not any other thing. Thus, we can only *say* what *we* can say; we can only *do* what *we* can do.

This is not a defeatist doctrine. It only seems so to those whose view of human nature is unduly pessimistic or to those who think that the so-called "limits" of human nature have been fixed in advance. Thoreau did not think that they were; if he had, there would have been no 'experiment' in his experiment. Emerson asked the question, "How can we know in advance what we are capable of?" And Thoreau answered, "We can't; we can only put ourselves to the test." Though there is no defeat in this, there is renunciation: there is a renouncing of any claim to empire, a renouncing of a claim on anything more than or other than human; and, there is acceptance, hence acknowledgement: the acknowledgement of embodiment, of being a human being. It is when we come up against what we are that we can say "This is, and no mistake."[9]

We might think of the passage I am responding to here as the beginning of Thoreau's reply to Descartes. When all else is stripped away, I am left with myself, with what I am - not with a mere thinking thing, though, but rather with a human being. "I only know myself as a human entity."

The passage on 'thinking' in "Solitude" (from which this last quoted line above is culled) finishes Thoreau's reply to Descartes, but readers of *Walden* have sometimes failed to notice this because they have thought the passage a celebration of a certain type of thinking. The passage begins by noting that in this type of thinking we can "be beside ourselves in a sane sense" (and that Thoreau adds ." . . . in a *sane* sense" is significant) and that by a conscious effort of mind (an effort like Descartes') we can "stand aloof from things and their consequences." This standing aloof puts the thinker in a position from which he "*may* be affected by a theatrical exhibition" and from which he "*may not* be affected by an actual event which appears to concern" him. But this is topsy-turvy, as Thoreau goes on to make clear when he points out that this standing aloof, this "doubleness," "may easily make us poor neighbors and friends." That the passage is condemnatory and not celebratory of this type of thinking is clinched by a further consideration: The first sentence of the next paragraph is: "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time." As I read the sentence, it looks back to the "doubleness" brought on by thinking and declares it unwholesome. How can a person be alone when he is standing beside himself? (The type of thinking Thoreau goes on to discuss, the type in which "a man . . . is always alone" is a different sort of matter; it is the type of thinking done by a person who acknowledges what he is and has no desire to stand aloof from it.[10]) In effect, Thoreau has condemned Descartes' project as yet another attempt to bargain away human nature in hopes of some grander goods. Unfortunately, Descartes' project leaves us empty handed and "stand[ing] as remote from [ourselves] as from another."

The point of departure for the philosopher then is human nature, the human entity. It is what Wittgenstein tells us "must be accepted." Making it the point of departure requires the philosopher to treat it as what is given to philosophy, not given in it.[11] In other words, the philosopher must treat human nature, the human entity, as "outside" philosophy: the human entity may not be treated as some kind of first principle (what would it mean to say it is "indubitable," "incorrigible," "self-justifying"?) Instead, it is the "external" ground of philosophy, something philosophy measures itself against; something it strives to be adequate to (and not vice versa.) The human entity is not the answer to any philosophical problem, but philosophy is answerable to it (to us): Thoreau locates his "hard bottom," his "reality," *below* philosophy, Wittgenstein reaches bedrock only *after* "exhausting the justifications," meaning that the bedrock - the human entity - justifies nothing and is justified by nothing (is something that "lies beyond being justified or unjustified" [(*OC* 359]). Any philosophy adequate to the human entity is not going to guarantee us against anything, nor is it going to guarantee anything, except that it is not, for human beings *here, now,* irrelevant or impractical.

IV

I have now reached a vantage point from which to address my initial worries. If human nature, the human entity, is what is given to philosophy, and if I was right to state that "our grammar tells us what kind of creature we are," then the attacks on ordinary language philosophy can be answered.

To begin, the tie-up between our nature and our grammar - our language - requires us to treat our grammar as itself given to philosophy. Like our nature, which pre-exists us in the form of our parents and elders, our language pre-exists us as well. The philosopher's concern with our language is a concern with us, with the things we talk about in it.[12] Thus, ordinary language philosophy will only be trivial or flat, or will only turn its back on the traditional questions and mission of philosophy, if *we* - the speakers of the language - talk only of what is trivial or flat, or if *we* turn our backs on the traditional questions and mission of philosophy. Still it is hard to see a Weltanschauung here. Is there one? Is this a Weltanschauung?

The answer, I think, is a qualified "Yes." Qualifications are needed because this ordinary language philosophy is not a Weltanschauung that a philosopher creates or that is forced on a philosopher. Seeing what is ordinary is not any special seeing. However, seeing what is ordinary *as ordinary* (not merely seeing the ordinary, but looking at it, noticing it), seeing it as the prevalent thread in the weave of our life, is a special seeing. It is a "way of looking at hings"; a "way of hearkening, [a] kind of receptivity" (*PI* 232). 'Hearkening' and 'receptivity' sound like echoes of a passage in *Walden* (often quoted by Cavell) in which Thoreau says:

> You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods and all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns.

I note that Wittgenstein's words echo Thoreau's because both put the premium on passivity, not activity. What is ordinary, as Wittgenstein reminds us in *PI* 600, does not

"impress us as ordinary." To notice the ordinary, to see what is ordinary as ordinary, requires us to reorient ourselves on our life and our language (our life with language). But this reorienting is not so much a matter of doing something as it is of refusing to do something (to "sublime the logic of our language," to try to get behind what is given; to ignore the necessities of life). It is a reorientation of the sort represented by choosing not to hunt for answers, but rather to sit still and let them come to us (by choosing not to explain but to describe).[13] The Weltanschauung of ordinary language philosophy is not something we create nor is it something forced upon us: it is given to us; it comes to us; we inherit it; it is our birthright. Too often however, it is something we must struggle to regain, because somewhere, sometime, we bargained it away - traded it for a bowl of alluvion.[14]

Notes

1. Putnam, H. *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, Ill: Open Court, 1987), 91.

2. I should point out that my reliance on the wording of Wittgenstein's remarks is the result of my belief that one can say of *Philosophical Investigations* what Cavell has said of *Walden*: That it "means every word it says . . . " Cavell, S. *The Sensen of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 33.

3. Harding, Walter. "Five Ways of Looking at Thoreau" in Meyerson, ed. *Critical Essays on Thoreau's Walden* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1988), 86.

4. The condition Thoreau calls "returning to his senses" is much the same condition Wittgenstein envisions when talking of "a sound human understanding." Neither condition is marked by an increase in acumen per se, or by an increase in knowledge, but rather by a heightened (if the near-circularity can be forgiven) sensibility, a greater attentiveness.

5. I cannot help thinking here of a line of Brian O'Shaughnessy's: "Do we turn towards the body, the flesh, as a salmon in spring will head up-stream?" "The Origin of Pain," *Analysis* (June, 1955), 129.

6. The temptation to ask the "chicken and egg" question about our talk of the world and our knowledge of it - namely: Which came first? - is a temptation that must be avoided.

7. By 'mock-formal distinction' here I mean that we can only imagine *imagining* knowing things and experiencing them in isolation from being able to talk about them. I am not at all sure we can imagine this. (I take something like this to be Wittgenstein's point when he says, of a person who imagines certain general facts of nature to be other than they are, that "*the formation* of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him" [emphasis mine] instead of saying that "the concepts *themselves* will become intelligible to him" (*PI* 230).

I want to say that our language, our nature and Nature are so tightly bound together that any command to imagine one in isolation from the other two is a command that leaves us at sea; if we are honest, we will admit that we have no idea how to go about obeying the command. (Think here not only of *PI* 230 but also of *PI* 19: "And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.")

8. This is the wrong way of responding to my suggestion, but the fact that it seems so appropriate needs to be accounted for. I think it seems an appropriate way of responding because it is an expression of the desire to escape the human predicament Schopenhauer describes as "knowing many things but being only one thing."

It is the desire to escape this predicament that (so often) warps epistemological inquiry. We want to be more than (at least other than) we are, so we try to make our knowledge of other things more than it is - we want knowing something to be tantamount to possessing it, to encompassing it. I take Santayana to be criticizing this desire and its

impact on epistemology when he notes that "Knowledge is not eating and we cannot be expected to devour what we mean"; and it is this desire and its impact that F.J.E. Woodbridge criticizes for leading to the confusing of "knowing a world" with "having a world to know." Cf. Adams and Montague, eds. *Contemporary American Philosophy* (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1962), 416.

9. By ". . . and no mistake" I take Thoreau only to be saying "This is, and *I am not mistaken*" not "This is, and *I cannot be mistaken.*" Anytime someone claims to be representing a statement of Thoreau's or of Wittgenstein's and the claim is a necessity claim or an impossibility claim, there is most likely mischief afoot. (A classic example: If Wittgenstein is attempting to arrive at some "position" in the so-called "Private Language Argument" it is not that we cannot have a private language, but simply that we do not. And this looks like a description or a reminder, and not a hypothesis.)

10. We might think of the difference as that between the pure thinker and (Emerson's) Man thinking.

11. This distinction is one I have borrowed from Everett Hall. Cf. *Philosophical Systems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 138ff.

12. As Cavell puts it, "Ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about." "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" in Black, M. *Philosophy in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), 96.

13. Cavell has also attempted to answer the question "Is this a 'Weltanschauung'?" (Cf. "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," 87): "The answer to [the] question is, I take it, not No. Not, perhaps, Yes; because it is not a *special*, or competing, way of looking at things. But not No; because its mark of success is that the world seem - be - different." My answer to the question is obviously similar to Cavell's; I differ with him in that I think the Weltanschauung to be a special - a competing - way of looking at things. Cavell may be right that any person who has only looked at the world the way Wittgenstein and Thoreau do would be misdescribed as "having a Weltangschauung"; but the trouble is that few, if any, grown-ups are in that position, especially among philosophers. For these non-innocent (non-childlike?) folk, it is a struggle to find and to remain in the ordinary - it is a struggle to care about the ordinary: As Wittgenstein puts it, "Here it is *difficult* as it were to keep our heads up, - to see that we must stick to the subjects of our everyday thinking . . . " (*PI* 106) [emphasis mine]. In this sense, this way of looking at things is indeed a special or competing way of looking at things. (For me, and not, I think, for Cavell, 'the ordinary Weltanschauung' is a *special* way of seeing what is itself not special. It is not the innocent way of looking at things, but rather a way of looking at things as if innocent: Once we have cast ourselves out of "the garden of the world we live in" (Austin), we must struggle to feel at home every time we return).

14. My thanks to Tim Dykstal for comments on an early draft of this paper.