

# Wittgensteinian Humanism, Democracy, and Technocracy

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**Abstract:** In this article, the author explores some possible applications of Wittgenstein's humanistic psychology, epistemology and philosophy of culture for the philosophy of technology, and more particularly, for the question of valuing a possible future technocracy over contemporary democratic systems. Major aspects of the article involve a discussion of some of Wittgenstein's key views on certainty, cultural relativism, the problem of other minds, and gradual socio-cultural change. In order to examine these problems, the author draws from both a wide range of Wittgenstein's works, as well as secondary sources in Wittgenstein studies. An analogy is made between socio-cultural change over time and gradual visual loss. The author has incorporated important elements of Wittgenstein's biography, both as a philosopher and as an engineer and architect, underlining the profound link between his life and thought.

**Key words:** technocracy, certainty, cultural change, democracy, humanism

## 1. Life and Work

In the aftermath of the twentieth century, and given the rapid transformations of our time, the discussion of technocracy is no idle exercise. The question of the scope of technology and its relationship to both the state and to culture is fundamental to understanding contemporary democratic life, business and consumer development, and ultimately our own cultural and political ideals. So, it is important to ask what contribution the study of Wittgenstein's philosophy can make to elucidating these questions. One can only hope that in this way, we will come better to understand not only Wittgenstein's thought with reference to technology, but a fundamental question of the twenty-first century: what should be technology's place in our political and cultural lives?

Recent historians and sociologists of technology have warned of the threat that an increasingly technocratic culture poses to humanistic and democratic values (Hughes 1994; Hughes 2004; Volti 2009). The theme of an all-encompassing technology destroying or at least seriously threatening humanistic values is by no means new, and key philosophical advocates of this view in the twentieth century include Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, and Langdon Winner (Heidegger 2013; Ellul 1967; Mumford 1970; Winner 1977).

Although philosophy of technology was by no means a major theme in either Wittgenstein's early ideas at the time he wrote the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1918), nor in his later work (post-1929), his general philosophy has thought-provoking implications for the question of technology's relationship to society. In particular, the pressing question of the growth of technocratic tendencies in Western culture can be elucidated using some of his working ideas and arguments. Furthermore, Wittgenstein himself saw scientism as one of his main targets throughout the later part of his career. He saw much of modernity as a steady and deplorable slip into an era dominated by science from which he felt completely alienated:

I have no sympathy for the current of European civilization and do not understand its goals, if it has any. . . . It is all one to me whether or not the typical western scientist understands my work, since he will not in any case understand the spirit in which I write. (Wittgenstein 1976, "Sketch for a Forward")

One might use the term "technocratic" in a broad sense to mean not narrow rule by engineers (Scott 1938; Veblen 1921), but rather the idea of a highly scientized society in which technology and the most instrumental forms of scientific rationality prevail over the traditional humanistic ideals that Wittgenstein valued. Furthermore, I here use the related term "scientism" to mean the perspective that holds that the primary criteria for meaning and truth ought to be set by science, including social science.

Technocracy is undeniably one of the most salient features of our time. It is manifested in a wide variety of ways in culture, politics, and commerce. The idea of rule by experts retains a genuine appeal for millions around the world. Furthermore, transhumanist and technophile futurists are currently arguing for the surpassing of humanity itself by technology as desirable and likely inevitable (Kurzweil 2005). A very recent and disturbing Pew Survey indicates that a full

forty percent of Americans would support experts rather than elected officials deciding what they take to be in their country's interest.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that Wittgenstein was deeply troubled by the prospect of an increasingly technocratic and scientific world. Having elaborated, in his early work, an ontology and philosophy of language deeply influenced by Fregean propositional logic and his work with Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein was no stranger to scientific conceptions of language and thought. The logical atomism of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was by no means purely positivistic, in that it contained meditations pointing beyond language to the mystical and God. It did, however, have affinities with positivism insofar as it was strict, even severe, in its propositional stipulations on the need to recognise the limits of language in philosophising. Note his fundamental claim that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 1961, 5.6).<sup>2</sup>

However, at this early stage of his philosophical development, Wittgenstein had not yet come to see science and technology as inimical in their development to an authentically ethical and humanistic conception of what it means to be human. Rather, there is a sense in which the *Tractarian* Wittgenstein saw scientific and logical thought as the background and framework for the important philosophical exercise of elaborating a powerful new version of propositional ontology, linked to the correspondence theory of truth. As such, theoretical science and logic (but not necessarily technology) are here seen as unproblematic in and of themselves, even though they are ultimately to be transcended in a mystical sort of way (Wittgenstein 1961, 6.45, 6.54).

Part of Wittgenstein's abhorrence of a scientific merging of science and philosophy with general culture was his disdain for the popular science books of his day, such as those by James Jeans and Arthur Eddington (Rhees 1984, 117). Philosophy, if it is to attain any real meaning and clarity ought, he thought, to eschew crossing boundaries. The language-games of philosophy and those of popular culture can at times color each other through our various activities, for Wittgenstein, but confusion and simplification can only result when any attempt is made to merge substantially different forms of life and practices. This could be exemplified by contrasting the philosophical use of an example drawn from popular culture with an attempt to blend the scientific and the cultural. For example, making reference to mechanical theory's aspects in order to analyse scientific explanation would be within proper philosophical boundaries on his account, whereas an attempt to replace or reduce mechanical theory with an ordinary language elucidation could only result in nonsense or confusion. It is interesting to note in this

context Wittgenstein's related contempt for Bertrand Russell's bestselling popular writings (Monk 1990, 471), as well as his criticisms of Freud's claim that the psychoanalytic analysis of dreams and free associations is scientific—as opposed to a modern myth:

Freud refers to various ancient myths in these connexions, and claims that his researches have now explained how it came about that anybody should think or propound a myth. . . . Whereas in fact Freud has done something different. What he has done is to propound a new myth. The attractiveness of the suggestion, for instance, that all anxiety is a repetition of the anxiety of the birth trauma, is just the attractiveness of a mythology. 'It is all the outcome of something that has happened long ago.' Almost like referring to a totem. (Wittgenstein 1966, 51)

This is a noteworthy example of Wittgenstein's view that scientism is a modern mythology rather than a new way of seeing the world, one entirely different from those of different eras.

By the 1930s, Wittgenstein had moved to a robustly socio-cultural and humanistic conception of philosophy. Key parts of this perspective are aspect psychology, forms of life, and the question of the limits of conceptual and cultural relativity. Wittgenstein has emerged as something of a *deus ex machina* on these questions for some, and as a reactionary or corrosive figure for others. This points to his pivotal role in a broad range of philosophical debates. In the interest of brevity, I will avoid the full intricacies of these debates, and offer my own application of his thought in this article. Here, the later Wittgenstein will be understood as engaged in a project of direct realist philosophical anthropology that has been termed "Wittgensteinian humanism" (Litwack 2009; Harcourt 2013). This entails a conception of philosophy that begins and ends with the centrality of the *human condition*, and its integral search for meaning and value in the key areas of ethics, religion, art, and politics. It is thus inimical to both strongly theocentric conceptions of value, and more importantly for our present purposes, to scientific and technocratic ones as well.

It is sometimes forgotten that Wittgenstein began his academic career as an undergraduate student in engineering. As a boy, he already showed a clear interest in technical matters, and at the age of ten, his sister Hermine saw him build a complex sewing machine (Rhees 1981, 1–2). He studied the new field of aeronautical engineering at the University of Manchester between 1908 and 1911, before beginning a serious study of analytical philosophy with Bertrand Russell at

Cambridge. At Manchester he worked with kites and developed a new model for a jet engine, as well as a patented propeller system that was adapted for use much later during the Second World War (Monk 1990, 34).

Wittgenstein never fully renounced his interest in technology, including architecture. In 1926, he was hired by his sister Margareth Stonborough-Wittgenstein to build a house for her in Vienna with his friend the professional architect Paul Engelmann. His standards of exactitude in this endeavour were high, and he seemed to enjoy presenting himself as an architect for some time after this project (*ibid.*, 236). His later work contained some thought-provoking remarks on architectural aesthetics (Wittgenstein 1966; Wittgenstein 1984). In 1943, he worked on the application of hospital technology to the treatment of shock at the Royal Infirmary in Newcastle (Monk 1990, 446–49). In this research, Wittgenstein’s acute sense of the meaning of words as their actual use in specific language games and practices proved to be of significant practical value to the scientific team that he worked with, stimulating them to consider closely the accepted vs. the clear and realistic uses of terms such as “shock” in the medical technology of the day.

Thus, it is clear that Wittgenstein was no stranger to technology, having worked on and off with it in a serious way throughout his life. It might even be said that he returned to it naturally after his youthful foray into engineering when he felt called upon to do so for altogether *ethical* reasons, such as helping his sister or victims of shock during the Second World War. This is important, because although Wittgenstein saw elaborate ethical and political theories as beyond the strict purview of philosophical analysis, he nonetheless felt an acute sense of the importance of ethics throughout his life, both personally and professionally. These personal commitments are consistent with a passion for truth that is equally reflected, in different ways, in both his early and later work. This may well account for part of his charismatic appeal to this day; the fact that he strove to unite philosophy and life. On a charitable reading, he could be seen as deeply distressed over his inability to “fix” problems, as opposed to describing and clarifying them. In this, he showed what might be described as an engineer’s spirit rather than mere self-hatred *and* misanthropy.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the most striking examples of Wittgenstein’s anti-scientism and wariness of technological power are to be found in two of his key later works: *Culture and Value* and *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*. Here, we are presented with some powerful and downright disturbing thoughts on various contemporary questions, notably his strong con-

demnation of intellectuals whom Wittgenstein saw as self-righteous in their shock at the recent atomic bombings of Japan:

[T]he bomb offers the prospect of the end, the destruction of an evil, our disgusting soapy water science. And certainly that's not an unpleasant thought; but who can say what would come *after* this destruction? (Wittgenstein 1984, 49)

No doubt some allowance must be made here for the impending sense of global apocalypse, a novel and highly disturbing feature of life in 1946, when these words were written. Science had come to seem, not just to Wittgenstein, but to much of humanity, as quite possibly the instrument of humanity's future destruction. Ray Monk summarizes this conjuncture ably:

Wittgenstein's pessimism about the fate of humanity was not caused by the catastrophic events that brought the Second World to a close . . . but those events seemed to reinforce in him the certitude of a long-held conviction that mankind was headed for disaster. The mechanical means of killing people that had been employed, and the fearsome displays of technological might that had been witnessed—the fire bombs at Dresden, the gas-ovens of the concentration camps—the atomic bombs unleashed on Japan established powerfully and finally that 'science and industry do decide wars.' And this seemed further to convince him in apocalyptic view that the end of mankind was the consequence of replacing the spirit with the machine, of turning away from God and placing our trust in scientific 'progress.' (Monk 1990, 489)

The historical and social dimension of Wittgenstein's despair is clear, from both his remarks and the general tenor of his times. It is perhaps difficult for us to imagine the initial sheer shock felt by millions over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, in the face of the carnage of the two world wars, the Holocaust and the atomic bomb because we have lived with their aftermaths for close to a century. The scale of high tech destruction of that bloody era was new; the twentieth century was history's bloodiest century (Ferguson 2009).

To claim that technology alone was the culprit would be both uncharitable and simplistic, avoiding the primary causes of human aggression and state power, and especially totalitarianism. However, intelligent observers such as Wittgenstein were no doubt struck by the remarkable increase in homicidal efficiency *facilitated* by modern technology. One could add to Monk's list machine guns, battlefield gas attacks in the First World War, and advanced artillery, among other technologies

of destruction. So Wittgenstein's dark pronouncements on the future of humanity were likely motivated not by misanthropy, but rather by a crisis of humanistic values in the face of what he took to be a growing and apocalyptic technocratic trend in the modern world. For him, as for many others, this trend led to periods of utter despair.

Wittgenstein's despair undoubtedly involved elements of personal psychology as well. He was a natural pessimist given to periods of anxiety and depression. He was perfectionistic both towards himself and others to a pathological and obsessional degree, and he was deeply disturbed by his hidden homosexuality. His passion for truth did not, given the realities of his era, override this concealed aspect of his personality, nor did it prevent him from claiming that he was only one quarter Jewish by descent when in fact he had three Jewish grandparents.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, he saw himself as living in the wrong era, due to his conservative taste in art (notably music) and what he took to be a general decline in European culture. This, more than a real commitment to communism, is likely the explanation of his brief attraction to Soviet Russia, to the point of inquiring into emigrating there.<sup>5</sup>

It is therefore not *surprising* to discover that Wittgenstein was no friend to what he termed "science" (*Wissenschaft*), but which sometimes is a clear reference to scientism. He once described science unflatteringly as rigidly proceeding on "railway tracks" (Rhees 1984, 202). This anti-scientistic tendency which was combined with a dread of technological determinism, is most apparent in the final ten to fifteen years of his life, during which time he wrote and elaborated the greater part of the work that would be published as the *Philosophical Investigations*, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, and *Culture and Value* (Wittgenstein 1976; Wittgenstein 1966; Wittgenstein 1984).

Throughout his life, Wittgenstein struggled towards a clear grasp of meaning and individual ethics. Whereas he thought the former to be potentially clarified by philosophy, he saw the latter as mainly a matter of personal honesty and commitment. Even when most influenced by positivism in the early phase of his career as a philosopher, he thought that science and value require separation, and that there are limits to what science can show. This is fundamental to his consistent and pessimistic anti-scientism. His engineering background never led him to a technocratic perspective, and he dreaded both scientistic and technocratic tendencies in twentieth century Western culture.

## 2. Direct Realism

My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul. The human body is the best picture of the human soul. (Wittgenstein 1976, Part Two, iv)

In we are to explore the relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy to the question of what our attitude should be towards a technocratic society, it is helpful to consider briefly his views on a range of topics, including direct realist psychology, cultural relativism and certainty. Wittgensteinian exegesis is notoriously immense and it has produced a wide range of readings. This is in part due to the fact that Wittgenstein left himself open to a variety of interpretations on various problems, and to the enlisting of Wittgenstein by the members of various philosophical schools. Whatever one's general interpretation may be, Wittgenstein was at heart, for all of his pessimistic observations, a particular type of humanist. I take him to have developed a powerful form of direct realist humanism in his writings, most notably in those within the realm of philosophical psychology and the philosophy of culture.

By "direct realist," I mean an account of mind and behaviour that stresses the importance of direct perceptions of consciousness and activity against the background of forms of life and attention to particulars. Unlike behaviourism, Wittgenstein's perspective does not focus narrowly on action to the exclusion of context, forms of life, and criteria for *psychological* ascriptions. Rather, his philosophical psychology stressed the importance of seeing conscious states *through* our behaviour. When combined with our normative rules and background beliefs and actions, we can perceive clearly a very wide range of mental states in other people. Although he does not often dwell upon ethical or political reactions in his discussions, the extension of such perceptions to these areas of life may well provide us with a framework for a form of direct realism about normative reactions in these areas: "[I]f someone has a pain in his hand, then the hand does not say so (unless it writes it) and one does not comfort the hand, but the sufferer: one looks into his face" (Wittgenstein 1966, 286).

On this question, and throughout his writings, Wittgenstein avoided elaborate theorising in favour of offering well-focussed descriptions, urging us not to imagine "musts", but rather to attempt to gain a realistic perception of things *as they are*. For example, in a striking passage in the *Philosophical Investigations*



that merits quotation at length, he asks us to try being genuinely sceptical on the question of other minds in the face of a group of children playing:

But can't I imagine that the people around me are automata, lack consciousness, even though they behave in the same way as usual?—If I imagine it now—alone in my room—I see people with fixed looks (as in a trance) going about their business—the idea is perhaps a little uncanny. But just try to keep hold of this idea in the midst of your ordinary intercourse with others, in the street, say! Say to yourself, for example: 'The children over there are mere automata; all their liveliness is mere automatism.' And you will either find these words becoming quite meaningless; or you will produce in yourself some kind of uncanny feeling, or something of the sort. (Wittgenstein 1976, 420)

We cannot avoid seeing the humanity in them, as hard as we try, and only a nonsensical theory could motivate us to even try to adopt such a curious attitude. Rather, Wittgenstein urges us to opt for a kind of direct realism about other minds, one that is ultimately grounded in a project of philosophical anthropology. This project runs throughout his later works, and it involves seeing other human beings as loci of value against the background of their beliefs and broadly rule-governed practices. When this is coupled with due attention to their conscious states, which he sometimes refers to as “soul” (*Seele*), we can be said to perceive directly human consciousness in a way that renders nonsensical scepticism about other minds, and that may well have ethical implications as well.

Thus, Wittgenstein's direct realism is a key part of the epistemic background to his broad project of a humanistic philosophical anthropology. Some of his key examples and thoughts in philosophy of mind point to a humanistic conception of the person as a centre of value, and it is likely that at least part of his abhorrence of scientism stemmed from what he took to be its anti-humanistic perspective, frequently backed by destructive and powerful technology.

### 3. Certainty

In *On Certainty*, one of his last works, Wittgenstein stresses the importance of implicit faith in the grounding implications of our behaving in the real world as an antidote to skeptical manoeuvres that deny the obvious.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes considered the product of a third and distinct phase of Wittgenstein's thought (Moyal-Sharrock 2004), *On Certainty* provides the reader with insight into his views on epistemology. It also may well be taken as a sign of his initial responses to

excessively relativistic interpretations of his work. At the core of his argument is Wittgenstein's notion of a "hinge proposition," a fact which is taken to be necessarily fundamental to our view of the world. The term is taken from Section 341 of *On Certainty*:

[T]he *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, as it were like hinges on which those turn. (Wittgenstein 1977, 341)

Also:

I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No; it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. (Wittgenstein 1977, 74)

And, comparing our "inherited background" to mythology, in its importance and fundamental character, Wittgenstein provides the following striking metaphor:

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. (Wittgenstein 1977, 97)

In these passages, Wittgenstein stresses the distinction between those propositions that may be empirical, but nonetheless are of more fundamental importance to our worldview. They are foundational insofar as other propositions in our belief system *turn upon*, or *flow over* them, to extend the metaphors. Furthermore, it is likely that the foundation in question here will be action, rather than words (Wittgenstein 1977, 232). At the same time, because of the possibility of a gradual shift in these foundational propositions, and their holistic functioning in our background system or form of life, there is at least a limited degree of coherentism in Wittgenstein's epistemology.<sup>7</sup>

Avrum Stroll has applied the notion of hinge propositions to matters of ethics in general—not just the straightforward empirical propositions of the sort that Wittgenstein focusses on in *On Certainty*. He writes, of a sceptic's persistent search for yet more fundamental grounds for belief:

Suppose one holds that cheating is always wrong, and suppose that a moral sceptic challenges this claim. . . . The eventual outcome to the process of responding to obsessive challenge is a form of foundationalism that asserts

that all moral reasoning ultimately rests on a principle that lies beyond justification or evidential support. (Stroll 2007, 132–33)

For Wittgenstein, certainty is best understood as at times consisting of explicit avowals, but it is often manifested in our fundamental belief in hinge propositions and actions linked to them. There are reasonable grounds for following Stroll in thinking that this process can extend to core beliefs in ethics, and potentially in politics, providing that we bear in mind the need for a critical flexibility towards the possibility of change. This critical flexibility is in keeping with Wittgenstein's notion of a doxastic river bed of our thought, and it eschews both dogmatic traditionalism and what might be termed a kind of naïve embrace of rapid change along the lines of transhumanist and technological determinist perspectives.

#### 4. Cultural Relativity vs. Relativism

The question of cultural relativity is central to the analysis of Wittgenstein's philosophy and the evaluations of entire forms of life or cultures. Cultural relativity is to be distinguished from cultural relativism insofar as the former is an unproblematic and empirically verifiable doctrine, while the latter is a form of reductionism. Cultural relativity merely affirms the wide variation in cultural beliefs, myths, and practices, whereas cultural relativism makes the much stronger normative claim to the effect that value can be explained entirely, or at least primarily, in terms of local cultural practices. It is thus concomitant to historical relativism, which affirms the priority of the temporal over the contemporary normative.

A full analysis of the question of cultural relativism would go well beyond the parameters of this article. However, a key and often unrecognized flaw in this strikingly widespread and popular doctrine is its failure to account for the legitimacy of judgemental variation within and between cultures. There are few truly homogenous cultures in this world, given the complexities of urbanisation, social pluralism, and globalization. Even the few traditional hunter gatherer societies that remain in the twenty-first century are often characterised by greater interaction with outsiders than previously was the case. This includes the Pacific island cultures studied in relative isolation, and possibly with highly relativistic theoretical presuppositions, by anthropologist Margaret Mead (Mead 2001). As almost all cultural groups or societies now exhibit multiple cultural influences, it is simplistic to view them as monocultural along the lines of classical academic anthropology.

There are various tendencies in Wittgenstein's own thoughts on cultural relativism. At times he seems to imply that *some* practices may be so hard to com-

prehend, that they may be incommensurable to us, while at other points he flatly denies incommensurability. The cross tendencies in his thought are most apparent in the following passage in which he is speaking of the aesthetics of the medievals' sense of royal fashion. He writes:

'Could you criticise [King Edward II's] robe as they criticised it?' You appreciate it in an entirely different way; your attitude to it is entirely different to that of a person living at the time it was designed. On the other hand, 'This is a fine Coronation robe!' might have been said by a man at the time in exactly the same way as a man says it now. (Wittgenstein 1976, 31)

This is best read as an affirmation of the presence of both agreement and disagreement between eras, and it can be extended to cross-cultural and ideological judgements today. On this reading, both cultural or historical relativism and what might be termed self-absorbed dogmatism are oversimplifications of the reality of value judgements, in all of their messy and complex reality. We are in some ways the same as others across historical and cultural divides, and in other ways very different. But this in no way implies that we cannot come to understand other forms of life with due attention to particulars and patience, as they can come to understand us. Some concepts and practices will be harder to get than others, no doubt. Yet a considerable degree of mutual comprehension is not only possible, but a fact of our historical and current interactions with other groups. And it would be false to ourselves to claim that disagreement and debate are always out of bounds in such cases. Rather, we must learn to manage and learn from such encounters as best we can.

This natural and inevitable process of managing cultural and conceptual encounters can be applied to adjudicating between concomitant strains in our own contemporary culture, especially when there are likely to be important points of difference between them. This can help us to understand the deep meaning of Wittgenstein's own unease with the twentieth century, as well as the unease that many of us even now sense in the choice to be made between a democratic and a technocratic future for ourselves.

## **5. Humanism or Technocracy?**

The relevance of these problems of cultural relativism to the question of Wittgensteinian humanism is evident when we consider the implications of valuing a technocratic over a democratic culture. Wittgenstein's philosophy alone does not give us license to either embrace or reject any given set of proposed reforms on

either conservative or progressive grounds. In her discussion of the question of acceptance of tradition versus dissent, Sabina Lovibond writes:

[W]e cannot turn to Wittgenstein's philosophy either for authority to lynch anybody, or for authority to insist upon toleration. And the same seems to be true about other brands of historicism about moral and intellectual norms: such doctrines are equally well-qualified to accompany a tolerant experimental cast of mind, or a defensive and authoritarian attachment to tradition. (Lovibond 1983, 173)

I take Lovibond's point here to be as follows: it really is *up to us*, as members of communities, societies, and cultures whether or not we want to retain or to change core practices and beliefs of our form of life. We are thus not obliged, on Wittgensteinian grounds, to embrace either social ossification or the embrace of whatever may be the currently fashionable "wave of the future."<sup>8</sup> Thus, in light of some contemporary views, when the movers and shakers of Silicon Valley speak as if there is an irresistible and deterministic cultural or historical "must" in the direction of future technocracy, or at least an even more mechanized world, we may either embrace or reject such a revolutionary move. Our choices will, as always, depend upon our values, choices and free actions.<sup>9</sup>

But of course, things are, as usual, far more complicated than they seem. The embrace or rejection of which I write cannot be of a single piece. It is, by its very nature, a gradual and complex process. Failing a centralized dictatorship that we should neither want nor feel compelled to bring about, the process of choosing a culture or a cultural shift consists of the vast sum of individual choices, values and practices, coupled with the actions and powers of numerous organizational bodies. These include democratically elected governments, corporations, NGOs and community organizations.<sup>10</sup> Without revolutionary dictatorial fiats such as in totalitarian regimes along the lines of the USSR or Nazi Germany, major socio-cultural change is gradual, interconnected, and downright messy and uneven in application (Berlin 2002; Litwack 2015; Popper 2011). However, because such change usually occurs in stages, and sometimes over several generations, it can be gradually accepted by millions of people affected by it. Before they as a society know it, those affected may find themselves within a significantly transformed form of life.

An analogy to glaucoma may prove useful here. In wide-angle glaucoma, the loss of vision is gradual and largely imperceptible, occurring as it does over many years and in small increments (see figure 1).<sup>11</sup> In the case of socio-cultural change, it is often the case that it occurs in such a way so as to be along the lines

of the “salami technique,” in which one gets the entire transformation thin slice by thin slice. Because there is no logical must or inevitability in this argument, but rather a reference to empirically and historically verifiable and contestable changes, this claim avoids slippery slope objections to the effect that an illegitimate fatalism is fallaciously implied. Rather, what is claimed is that gradual but significant changes take place, piece by piece and that they may well culminate in a state of affairs very different from the starting point. In this case, generations of the far future may wonder why we valued the inefficient procedure of voting over rule by expert technocrats armed with largely automated and efficient machines. This could be seen as a high-tech re-working of Plato’s ancient argument for rule by a ship’s captain rather than by sailors (Plato 2008, Book One).

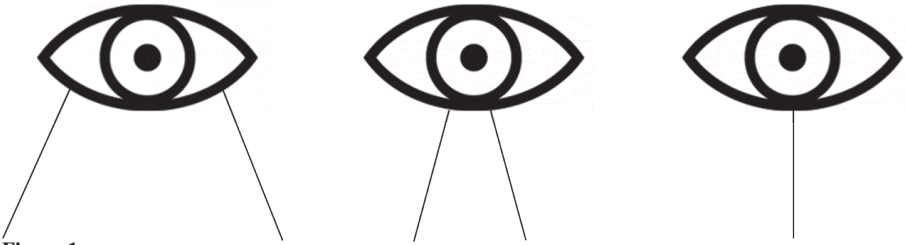


Figure 1

In discussing aesthetic semantics, Berys Gaut has employed the notion of “cluster concepts” (Gaut 2000). The essential idea of this is that some concepts—such as the very definition of art—are so complex that they consist of many aspects, and there is no set number of criteria (e.g., “three rather than four out of five would be enough”) that must at all times and for everyone settle the question of the definition and application of a term such as “art.” We simply have to use our judgment and wisdom and get a feel for this sort of thing. If we apply this to the question of cultural change at hand, we may decide that having come as close as we are to a technocracy, this is as far as we will go. It is already the case that technology is far more central to our lives than it was even a generation ago, and that at that point (say the 1970s to the 1980s) it was already incomparably more central to human life than it was before the Industrial Revolution. To go beyond our generation’s radical dependence on the machine in culture into the realm of political control may well be a cluster part too far. Four out of five cluster criteria would be too extreme, and if so, we had better be clear about such an excessive move before the process of technological momentum goes that far over the course of this century (Bostrum 2009; Hughes 1994 and elsewhere in Hughes’s works).

Consider as well the question of extreme normative change in our very understanding and application of moral notions. For centuries, chastity was considered in Western culture the height of a woman's value and a strict requirement for marriage. It is valued in traditional cultures and religious communities around the world to this day. Outside those communities, it could only be considered either a historically rich joke or a sexist claim. It has taken centuries since the Middle Ages to reach this point, but we have now arrived.

My purpose here, of course, is not to defend medieval notions of virtue. It is rather to give a real historical example of how a value can go from cherished to out of bounds over the course of time. What of the future of democracy? Could democracy, in spite of its widespread acceptance end up going the way of medieval chastity? It would no doubt take much time and effort to bring about this change, but stranger things have happened across history. This is especially true given the immensely powerful albeit diverse forces that may well be working against it and in favour of technocracy.

## **Conclusion**

Wittgenstein's philosophy in and of itself cannot provide those of us who would rightly defend democracy with a sufficient arsenal, in keeping with Lovibond's claim that more than this is required for so robust an ethical and political commitment. However, there are reasons for holding that the humanistic dimension of Wittgenstein's philosophical anthropology *allows* us to affirm, in a particular way, our certainty about democracy's value.

This is in keeping with a plausible and non-relativistic interpretation of his philosophy of culture, as explicated in my discussion of Wittgenstein's notion of certainty. It does not follow, in any sense, that the acceptance of the empirically true thesis of cultural relativity requires full-blown cultural relativism. From the fact that there is considerable variation between and even within cultures, it does not follow that judgements of value cannot go beyond cultural boundaries which are flexible by definition. This applies equally to judgements across history as well. From the undeniable fact that the Romans enjoyed the coliseum spectacle of human beings fighting each other and wild animals to the death in gladiatorial combat, neither an attitude of uncritical relativistic acceptance nor one of self-righteous rejection of an entire form of life *must* follow. Cultural relativity implies neither full blown relativism nor self-absorbed dogmatism.

On a Wittgensteinian account, we can come to understand what the Romans did, even though in this case the commensurability between our culture and theirs

may require great effort to bridge. This is true, because of both the distinctiveness of criteria for the application of our moral concepts and their meaning, as well as the fundamental reality of our commitments to hinge propositions. Given who we are and what we believe, it would be normal for us to understand the Romans whose practices are at least partially commensurable to us, while reserving the right to disapprove of individual practices such as the gladiatorial matches. Our own humanistic hinge propositions such as “individuals have rights” and “there are ethical limits to what you can do to people in sports” are no less fundamental to our form of life than those of the Romans were to theirs.

If Wittgenstein is correct, we can see the suffering of others directly, and with certitude, and this fact might serve as a powerful beginning towards a valuing of individual human beings as fellow sentient beings (although more would have to be said here). Furthermore, given the existence of at least partial commensurability between us and the Romans, the possibility of dialogue and perhaps even eventual if strained agreement between us and a similar culture today or in the future remains.

Let us return now to our choice between humanism’s ally, democracy, and its technocratic rival. On a Wittgensteinian account of language, mind, and knowledge, we must first identify our hinge propositions in core areas of individual rights, freedom of expression, and free, fair and frequent elections (Dahl and Shapiro 2015). This could be done via constitutions, public fora, and referenda. Our humanistic hinge propositions are basic to our form of life; although we can indeed abandon them, this would only be at the cost of changes to our political culture of the most fundamental and transformative sort. We, as practitioners of democracy, would thus cease to be who we are, by any reasonable definition, and this change is neither necessarily inevitable nor desirable. In other words, to change our hinge propositions, in effect, should imply a strong commitment to turn into something that we currently are not, and there is no metaphysical “must” that compels us to welcome such an alleged wave of the future.

Furthermore, if we did make this change, our hinges would go from highly oiled to rigid and even rusty. Democracy, beyond any other socio-political system, facilitates inclusive change and human diversity. If we are to take Wittgenstein’s flexible foundationalism seriously, democracy’s underlying rationale for cultural and intellectual pluralism is a serious reason for choosing it over technocracy or any other non-democratic system. We should do so, even though we are not *compelled* to choose it. This is because the democratic way of life is the best framework for the humanism that Wittgenstein saw as implicit to his general philosophy,



even though he struggled at times with its full incorporation into it. Furthermore, democratic humanism affirms both the importance of having core values, as well as being open to gradual and reasonable change, in keeping with Wittgenstein's overall thought. This implies that current technological development, for all of its great momentum, should not eclipse our more fundamental and historically evolved democratic values. These values constitute key parts of the framework in which technology operated and continues to operate, as a complex system for intervening in and modifying the world. Technology ought to enhance and defend democracy, not supplant it.

## Notes

1. See Wike, Simmons, Stokes, and Fetterolf 2017. The percentages holding this view in Canada and the UK are almost identical: forty-one and forty-two percent, respectively. Although support for democracy remains concomitantly high not just in the democratic world, but in many non-democratic societies, this clear sympathy for technocracy is food for thought.

2. In this article, I will use numerical references to Wittgenstein's works to indicate primarily section numbers (where they are used) rather than page numbers, in keeping with standard Wittgenstein scholarship.

3. The preeminent engineering writer Samuel Florman states: "[I]f ever there was a group dedicated to—obsessed with—morality, conscience, and social responsibility, it has been the engineering profession. Practically every description of the practice of engineering has stressed the description of service to humanity" (Florman 1994, chap. 3 et passim).

4. For the controversial matter of Wittgenstein's sexuality, see Monk 1990, passim, and in particular *Appendix: Bartley's Wittgenstein and the Coded Remarks*. On the question of Wittgenstein's concealed Jewishness, see Fania Pascal's reminiscences in Rhees 1984.

5. See his remarks to Rush Rhee to the effect that Russia's new Soviet culture was "new" and "vital," and that America lacked a full culture and could learn from it (Rhees 1984, 205).

6. Compare Richard Dawkins's humorous realist quip: "show me a cultural relativist at thirty thousand feet and I'll show you a hypocrite" (Dawkins 1995, 32).

7. There are thus affinities between Wittgenstein's model and Susan Haack's notion of "foundherentism" in Haack 1993.

8. Knowing that this rubric was once widely applied to fascism may have a sobering effect. See Anne Morrow Lindbergh 1940. Here the “inevitable” future is held to be American isolationism and totalitarianism, in keeping with the political commitments that Ms. Morrow Lindbergh shared with her aviator spouse.

9. For examples of this superficial historical and cultural determinism, see Kurzweil 2005. Silicon Valley’s own Bill Joy (2000) provides a salutary and balanced retort to this type of thinking. In particular, Joy stresses the desirability of a humanistic pessimism which eschews transhumanist perfectionism concerning the human condition while remaining honest about the juggernaut-like momentum of contemporary high technology. On a Wittgensteinian analysis, I would wish to claim, transhumanism may be seen as a complete and rapid distortion of our complex form of life in favour of a way of being with which we are not likely to “find our feet” (Wittgenstein 1976, 223). Indeed, the transhumanist project would represent not just a radically different way of life or culture, which is the subject of Wittgenstein’s metaphor, but a fundamental change of our very definition of what it means to be human. As such, our current criteria for psychological ascriptions might be rapidly rendered inapplicable.

10. See Schroeder 2007 for a sociological analysis of this phenomenon.

11. Image adapted from National Eye Institute (NEI) 2014. Glaucoma also tends to develop with patient symptoms that are not detectable without complex ophthalmological technology such as the tonometer, which measures eye pressure. This is why it is called the “silent thief of sight” (ibid.).

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