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Winds of Change: The Later Wittgenstein's Conception of the Dynamics of Change

Abstract

The theme of change is one of the most prominent traits of Wittgenstein's later work, and his writings have inspired many contemporary thinkers' discussions of changes in e.g. concepts, "aspect-seeing", practices, worldviews, and forms of life. However, Wittgenstein's conception of the dynamics of change has not been investigated in its own right. The aim of this paper is to investigate which understanding of the dynamics of changes can be found in the later Wittgenstein's work. I will argue that what emerges is a rich and complex picture that has the potential to aid our thinking in politics and elsewhere when developing strategies for creating changes. It can do so both as source of inspiration and by countering tempting, yet ultimately problematic ways of conceptualizing change like the hope for transforming harmful traditions and social practices with the help of a general explanatory theory of the fundamental dynamics of changes.

1. Heraclitus' Heir

The concept of a "festivity". Connected for us with merrymaking; perhaps in another age only with fear & dread. What we call "wit" & what we call "humour" doubtless did not exist in other ages. And both these are perpetually changing. (CV: 89)¹

¹ In this article, Wittgenstein's works are abbreviated in the following manner: *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (hereafter RFM), *Culture and Value* (hereafter CV), *On Certainty* (hereafter OC), *Philosophical Investigations* (hereafter PI, and part two as PI II), *Zettel* (hereafter Z) and "Remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*" (hereafter RF).

The theme of *change* is prominent in Wittgenstein's later work. He mentions and discusses changes in concepts, beliefs, languages, practices, world-pictures, cultures and nature, and his work has inspired both prominent and contemporary thinkers in their discussions of change.² However, Wittgenstein's understanding of the dynamics of change has yet to be investigated in its own right.³ It has even been suggested that Wittgenstein lacks an account of the dynamics leading to the evolution of language and practices (Ackermann 1988: 216–224).

The aim of this article is to trace and try to unfold the conception of the dynamics of change implicit in the scattered remarks on dynamics that can be found in the later Wittgenstein's writings. I argue that Wittgenstein's later work displays an advanced, irreducibly pluralistic and, in some cases, also holistic and organic understanding of the unfolding of changes in language-games, practices and human forms of life.⁴

Having a clear conceptual understanding of the dynamics of change in the human lifeworld is important in so far as conceptualizations guide us – or mislead us – when we actively seek to revise harmful traditions and institutions in our roles as citizens, scientists, leaders and politicians (PI: § 115; CV: 99; Bicchieri 2017: vii–viii, 1; Hopf 2017: 2). Wittgenstein does not discuss change with the aim of occasioning societal progress. He does so with the aim of addressing various philosophical questions and problems, such as

² See e.g. Kuhn (1970); Schatzki (2002, 2008); Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks & Yanow (2009); Morawetz (2000); Polyakov (2012); Miettinen, Paavola & Pohjola (2012); Gad & Jensen (2014); Cahill (2016); Koopman (2017); Eldridge (2017); Hopf (2017); Hämäläinen (2018); Pleasants (2018); Baker (2019). Wittgenstein's views on cultural progress and decline (i.e. positively or negatively evaluated cultural changes) have also been investigated and discussed – hereunder whether or not he was a conservative thinker (see e.g. Ackermann (1988); von Wright (1993); Holt (1997); Hill (1997); Crary (2000, 2007); Pleasants (2000); Cerbone (2003); Tully (2003); Heyes (2003: 4–7); Cahill (2006, 2009); Moore (2010); Bouveresse (2011); Hermann (2015); Read (2016); Diamond (2012, 2019)).

³ A preliminary way of explaining the term “dynamic” is to say that the dynamics of a change are those which can be presented as the answer to the question “Why did this change happen?”.

⁴ The article mainly focusses on changes in practices and less on other sorts of changes, such as those in individual persons' lives (like what, for instance, might create a change in a person's perspective/”aspect-seeing”, a change in a person's religious beliefs, or changes stemming from “work on oneself” as a philosopher, or on what one expects from life) (see e.g. PI: § 89, 199; OC § 92; Z: § 314; CV: 31, 60, 61).

how we should understand the relations between language and world, the role of proofs in mathematics and the nature of normativity. Nonetheless, his philosophical investigations are of potential use to those seeking change because of the conceptual clarity they may lend to more practical endeavours. Furthermore, his thinking offers us reasons to be skeptical about the influential and tempting idea that a general explanatory theory of recurring dynamics of change can be developed, which will enable us to create future progress.

2. Practices, Languages, Forms of Life: Dynamic Phenomena

Wittgenstein sees languages, practices and forms of life as dynamic phenomena.⁵ They are not fixed and not given once and for all. New types of language, new practices and new ways of living arise, and others become obsolete and forgotten (PI: § 23).⁶ The most famous analogy, which he uses to bring out the dynamic – as well as the more static – traits of languages and world-pictures, is the so-called “River-picture” from *On Certainty*:

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. (§ 96)

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. (§ 97)

⁵ Wittgenstein scholars differs as to how many distinct meanings the expressions “Life form” and “Form of life” have. In my understanding, Wittgenstein uses the terms to refer either to “a particular culture” (PI: §§ 23, 44, 441) or to something more universal and static, “the common life form of the human kind” (PI: §§ 25, 206, 241; PI II: §§ 1, 345, 415; OC: § 156). In this article the phrase “form of life” is used in the sense of “a particular culture”. See Boncompagni (2015) for an elucidation of the evolution of the concept in Wittgenstein’s later work.

⁶ See also PI: § 352; OC: §§ 151, 210–211, 256, 336, 403, 414; CV: 23.

And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited. (§ 99)

With this analogy Wittgenstein brings forth a powerful image of constant movement of some elements of languages and worldviews, less movements of others, and hardly any in what he calls “the bedrock” of a worldview.⁷ The next section will investigate the kind of dynamics that is treated as leading to change by Wittgenstein in his later work.

3. Dynamics of Change

The examples of change that Wittgenstein mentions or investigates in his work, are more often simple, imaginary examples than detailed descriptions of actual historic changes, and the examples I discuss below are no exception.⁸ They have this character because they do not aim to supply the reader with new information (as might be the case in the empirical sciences). Their roles are to remind us of something we already know but tend to forget when philosophizing, to create a conceptual overview, or to loosen the grip a certain image has on us (PI: §§ 89–133; Kuusela 2008).

Similarly, the function of the following examples is not to represent “a list of the categories of general dynamics”. They are instead intended to serve as reminders of the many different things we are prepared to recognise as a possible change creating factor. The examples have been chosen to help counter the temptation of thinking that there *must* be an overarching, fundamental dynamic (or

⁷ How this analogy is to be interpreted (and especially its consequences for discussions of normativity, naturalism, conservatism, relativism, realism, anti-realism, among other things) has been and still is debated. This article focusses on the fluid and dynamic aspects of practices and human life in Wittgenstein’s work and does not discuss how to understand the more static aspects, which, in my opinion, are equally important for an understanding of his thinking. See e.g. Williams (1999, 2009, 2013), Crary (2000, 2007), Moyal-Sharrock (2004, 2009, 2015), and Diamond (2012, 2013).

⁸ For further discussions of this particular trait of Wittgenstein’s work see e.g. Bloor (1983: 1–5, 182–4; 2006), Cerbone (1994), Peach (2004) and Moi (2017: 24).

set of dynamics) that can be used to explain the unfolding of changes in the human lifeworld.

The following list therefore mirrors Wittgenstein's strategy of listing different uses of language in e.g. § 23–24 in *Philosophical Investigations*, as a way of countering the temptation of thinking that language must serve only one function (say, to depict facts).

In section 4 and 5, I will elaborate on themes first developed in this section by critically discussing the idea that a general explanatory theory of recurring dynamics of change can be developed that will enable us to create future progress.

Fashion-trends

A kind of order [...] is introduced, like streamlining in perambulators and lamps, because it has perhaps proved its value somewhere else and in this way has become the style or fashion. (RFM: Part 3 § 83).

Wittgenstein reminds us that human beings are creatures who alter practices because of fashions and trends. Such trends emerge in countless areas of human life, from the shape of clothes and beards, over the food and drink we crave, to the shapes of buildings and research-projects. Wittgenstein's example in the quoted passage concerns a shift in a design practice, which, having proven to be practically useful in one context, is then transferred to another context.

For example, streamlining has proven very useful in the context of sports car racing, where the aim is to make the cars go as fast as possible. While the modern parent may be a uniquely busy species, they do not share the same ambitions for speed when selecting a baby carriage, many of which have nevertheless incorporated streamlining into their design. Here the design feature serves a purely aesthetic purpose. This illustrates how an element of one area of human endeavour can become fashionable and transplanted into another even without the original rationale.

Invention

In his writings, Wittgenstein discusses the invention of proof in mathematics and addresses how this can change our mathematical practice:

For the point of a new technique of calculation is to supply us with a *new picture, a new form of expression*; [...] (RFM: Part 2 § 46)

One would like to say: the proof changes the grammar of our language, changes our concepts. It makes new connexions, and it creates the concept of these connexions. (It does not establish that they are there; they do not exist until it makes them.) (RFM: Part 3 § 31)⁹

By presenting us with a new picture, a new proof also fundamentally alters our concepts. It may thus give rise to new ways of talking about things, of comparing things, of doing things, or may even give birth to a new form of activity – such as a new style of painting or a new way of singing (PI: §§ 400–401). Looking outside mathematics, one might think of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory as such an invention: Freud presents us with a new picture of the human psyche divided into conscious and unconscious parts. This represents a significant innovation, because it caught on culturally and to a great extent has restructured how we understand each other and how we understand ourselves: numerous psychoanalytic and therapeutic approaches have been developed and are currently practiced; psychology and psychiatry are both well-established academic disciplines that have created roles and relationships, such as that of therapist and patient; an extremely successful publishing industry has arisen around self-help books and magazines, as well as popular talks and podcasts, self-improvement courses and, along with all of this, an entire field of discourse: a new way of understanding human life and its accompanying suffering. In other words, Freud and his heirs have given us new ways of talking about things, new ways of comparing things, new ways of doing things, and new things to do.

⁹ See also RFM: Part 4 § 36, Part 5 § 34.

Cultural Interactions

Supposing we met people who did not regard that [the propositions of physics] as a telling reason. Now, how do we imagine this? Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle. (OC: § 609)

One can find discussions of cross-cultural encounters scattered throughout Wittgenstein's writings. While these are sometimes drawn from anthropology (as in RF), they often appear in thought experiments in which the reader is asked to imagine an interaction with a fictitious tribe, as in the example above. We are asked how we might react if confronted with a tribe that would sooner go to an oracle for advice on, say, building houses or bridges, than consult someone with a knowledge of physics. We are also asked how our and their practices and worldviews *might* be altered by such a confrontation. Wittgenstein makes several remarks in this connection:

Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it? – If we call this “wrong” aren't we using our language-game as a base from which to *combat* theirs? (OC: § 609)

And are we right or wrong to combat it? Of course there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings. (OC: § 610)

Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic. (OC: § 611)

I said I would ‘combat’ the other man, – but wouldn't I give him *reasons*? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.). (OC: § 612)

In these remarks, Wittgenstein considers one possible line of response: rather than changing our own cultural practices, we actively try to make the tribe change theirs. We begin with *a negative evaluation* of the of the tribe; it is “primitive”, we think, its members “fools” and “heretics”. We then try *to convince* the tribe to give up their practice of consulting oracles by offering them reasons. If that strategy fails (and Wittgenstein seems to suggest it very well might),

we then try to *persuade* them (in the sense of *converting them*) to abandon their Oracle-practice and embrace our “Physics-practice” instead. From histories of colonization, we know several strategies may be employed in such a situation, including “the carrot-or-stick-approach”: if they change their practice, they will be rewarded; if not, pain and punishment may ensue.

If the conversion is successful, the tribe will have experienced, as result of this clash of cultures, a radical change with respect to their oracle practice or even their giving it up entirely. Filling out the example, it would seem the tribe’s adoption of scientific approach in practical matters would necessitate wider changes in their overall worldview, as this change could not be an isolated event. Organizing practical matters around the laws of physics in everyday matters would likely bring with it many other changes in their worldview.

Cross-cultural encounters that result in some form of cultural change of either party are thus another possible impetus in the evolution of practices and forms of life (OC: §§ 92, 262).

Teaching

Wittgenstein also imagines a case in which a traveller from his own culture encounters a tribe that only performs mathematical calculations orally (RFM: Part 3 § 81). The traveller teaches the tribe how to write and perform mathematical calculations in writing, pointing out along the way that their former math practices often lead to error. The tribe learns and implements the new method, thus changing their practice against the background of being taught something new. Wittgenstein suggests, though, that the tribe might very well be unhappy with the change (it has killed *the soul* of math, they perhaps say), leaving it an open question whether the tribe will resume their original practice.

Correction of Mistakes

Wittgenstein observes that people sometimes discover that their current practice rests on a mistake and so decide to change it for that reason (RF: 30). While Wittgenstein does not provide examples of the kind of mistake he has in mind, they are not hard to imagine.

Suppose I use a certain chemical to remove weeds in my garden, a practice my neighbour, a biologist, knows to be ineffective. Other things being equal, I would likely change my practice when he informs me of my mistake and suggests more effective methods. In some cases, when my practice is based on a false belief, I readily change it when made aware of my error.

Wittgenstein also considers a scenario in which we give up a particular belief we once held for what seemed to be good reasons, and change our practices accordingly. But later we find we were right the first time and therefore choose to reverse course and return to our original practice (OC: § 599, Marginal Note). A reversal of precisely this kind occurred with respect to the practice of breastfeeding in Europe, which has been abandoned several times – each time for reasons of the “health and hygiene” of the baby, only to be readopted years later for these very same reasons (Cunningham 2012: 366–367; see also Baker’s work on ‘counter-revolutions’ and ‘irredentism’ (2019: 115-153) for a discussion of similar situations).

Physical Suffering

In *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Wittgenstein asks his reader to consider the following case:

Think of the use of the motor-car producing or encouraging certain sicknesses, and mankind being plagued by such sickness until, from some cause or other, as the result of some development or other, it abandons the habit of driving. (RFM: Part 2 § 23)

In this example, health concerns are not explicitly cited as the reason for abandoning the practice of car use. Suppose, however, that people *did* discover a connection between health problems and the use of cars; changing their practices would seem plausible and indeed likely. A parallel example can be found in the case of Thalidomide. Doctors stopped prescribing the drug, once commonly prescribed to pregnant women for morning sickness, after it was discovered that it caused serious birth defects.

At the same time, things *might not* follow the same pattern in the hypothetical case we are imagining: people might very well retain their transport practice despite learning of its harmful effects. After

all, despite solid evidence that it causes serious disease, many continue to smoke; some even continue to smoke after contracting lung cancer. Similarly, evidence abounds suggesting a link between our current car use and “certain diseases”, with car accidents and air-, water-, and noise pollution causing millions of deaths worldwide each year. While this is in some sense common knowledge, few choose to give up driving as a result.¹⁰ Having a good reason for changing a practice, it seems, is not always enough for the change to take place. Still, at least some of time, discovery of a causal link to harmful effects is sufficient to induce a change in practice.

Spiritual Suffering

In former times people entered monasteries. Were they perhaps simpleminded, or obtuse people? – Well, if people like that took such measures so as to be able to go on living, the problem cannot be an easy one! (CV: 56)

In this example, Wittgenstein seems to suggest that, on occasion, the ideals and beliefs of a given culture can be so demanding, or cause such spiritual suffering, that some individuals must resort to radical changes to make life bearable. One might here think of someone deciding to live according to the strict rules of a monastery because in the society outside the monastery it was too difficult not to sin and to live up to God’s demands (the temptations, the eternal compromises due to the many conflicting demands and obligations of ordinary family- and community life).

The life of Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s 1879 play *A Doll’s House* is often interpreted in an analogous way. In this case, the relevant cultural pressures are those associated with the life of an upper-class wife: Nora feels compelled to change her life fundamentally (leaving her husband and children) in order to develop a new, more mature way of living, because her life has become unbearable.

¹⁰ Pleasants (2010) offers us one explanation as to why people in such situations do not always give up the harmful practice, which they can have very good reasons to give up, namely that they believe they have no practical alternative and also believe their form of life to some extent depends on the practice (his example concerns slavery).

We can also imagine a society and culture that cause not only a few individuals, but most of its citizens spiritual suffering. In the novel *1984*, George Orwell unfolds what such a form of life can look like, which have informed many people's fears of a surveillance society ever since. In *1984*, no one, and not even your own thoughts, feelings and words are to be fully trusted. Anthropologist Joel Robbins's descriptions of the life of the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea offers us another example (Robbins 2004). In the 1960s, the Urapmin people chose to convert from their traditional religion to a form of Christianity focussed on sinfulness and driven by a strong millennial expectation. In this society, everybody needs to be ready and free of sin, because the millennial time is near – there are signs of this everywhere. However, not all Gods die easily. To this day, the traditional Gods still demand to be honoured, and the Urapmin are therefore caught in two competing ways of living. Honouring the moral demands of the old ways counts as sinfulness in the Christian life and tending to the state of one's own soul count as a moral vice in the traditional life. Yet they are under the demand of both. The result of this hybrid is a daily moral struggle consuming most of the energy of the whole Urapmin society.

A change in the life of a person, the life of a group of people, and even a whole culture can grow out of spiritual suffering, which in some cases can be transformed into political, religious and moral aspirations and actions. “The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings” (RFM: Part 2 § 23).

New Values and Ideals

Wittgenstein notes with apparent regret that, at the time of his writing, a school had come to be well-thought of if the children “have a good time” while attending, noting further that this was *not* the measuring rod used in earlier times. Children, Wittgenstein continues, are no longer brought up to be able to endure suffering. In fact, he goes on to say “the skill of suffering” is no longer valued at all, as we have now come to think suffering ought to be absent from our lives, and especially from the lives of children (CV: 81–2). Here, the change in educational practices is explained as having taken

place due to the advent of new values and ideals, changing conceptions of childhood and of human life more generally.

Changes in Nature

And if things were quite different from what they actually are – if there were, for instance, no characteristic expression of pain, of fear, of joy; if rule became exception, and exception rule; or if both became phenomena of roughly equal frequency – our normal language-games would thereby lose their point. (PI: § 142)

Human practices and forms of life depend upon nature, including human nature, and they depend on the continuity and stability of certain features of nature. Wittgenstein illustrates this point by noting that many cultures have the practice of pricing goods, cheese for example, according to their weight. This practice depends on the weights of objects traded remaining constant. If nature were to change such that lumps of cheese suddenly vanished into thin air or grew quickly in size, this kind of pricing practice would lose its point (PI: § 142; see also OC: § 63). This example reminds us that a change in some part of physical nature may cause a change in our economic practices, in this case, from having a point to losing it.

However, Wittgenstein does not treat traits of physical nature as the basis of *all* explanation, although he does treat them as basis for some in *specific* cases – as we saw in the example above. The dynamics leading to a change may equally well include facts about fashion, economy, moral ideals and power structures (Z: § 352).

Spontaneity

During an investigation of the nature of mathematics (in which Wittgenstein among other things tries to counter the urge his reader could have to see us as forced to do mathematics a certain way (it *must* be that way; the proof *compels* me)) he remarks:

‘We decide on a new language-game.’ ‘We decide *spontaneously*’ (I should like to say) ‘on a new language-game.’ (RFM: Part 4 § 23)

Here we are presented with a picture of humans as creators and initiators – as *founders* of new practices, new ways of living. In initiating such changes, we may be acting upon reasons, as when doctors stopped prescribing Thalidomide to pregnant women, or when Nora decided to leave her family. But the above image reminds us that humans sometimes change their practices for no particular reason and without being forced to do so. Everyday examples of this could be when a new figure of speech spreads or when all children in a school starts playing with yo-yos (a fad). Spontaneity is thus also among the possible dynamics of change in our practices.

On the basis of various scattered remarks in the work of the later Wittgenstein, I have now constructed and considered several examples of changes to practices and their dynamics. In the following sections, I discuss and unfold which conception of the dynamics of change can be formed on the basis of the way in which Wittgenstein presents examples of change and their dynamics, as well as the remarks he makes about them. In this I will draw on both Wittgenstein’s own remarks and the examples above, which I have supplied as a means of unfolding his remarks.

4. Wittgenstein’s Conception of the Dynamics of Change

Firstly, let us return to the claim mentioned in the first section: i.e., that Wittgenstein does not have a properly developed conception of language-game changes and their dynamics. According to R. J. Ackermann, it is a problematic trait of Wittgenstein’s work that he does not *explain* changes in language-games but only *describes* them (Ackermann 1988: 217). Ackermann finds it problematic that Wittgenstein’s thinking is missing any notion of the dynamics that *force* language to change, and also that Wittgenstein does not recognise that *conflicting* language games and interests bring about transformations of practices (ibid.: 216–221). In short, “Wittgenstein has no account of the dynamics of language change in science and elsewhere [...]” (ibid.: 224).

Ackermann’s critique makes sense in so far as Wittgenstein does not make “dynamics of change” a direct topic of his investigations, in the same way he deals extensively with topics such as “knowledge”

and “meaning”. Ackermann is also right in observing that Wittgenstein does not offer general explanations of changes in language games, if by this he means something along the lines of “putting forward historical, sociological or other forms of empirical explanations for *actual* changes of practices” or “developing a theory about what *generally causes* changes in language-games and forms of life”. Wittgenstein does not do so because, on his conception of philosophy, that is not the job of a philosopher (PI: §§ 89–133; PI II: xii). These forms of empirical explanation and theory-development are the jobs of linguists, historians, psychologists and sociologists, among others.

However, Wittgenstein does explain changes in language-games in the sense that he, for instance, reminds his readers of what we see as a cause or a reason that can lead to a change of practice (e.g., a change of nature or a change of ideals) – and he reminds us of what people in other times or in other cultures recognise as such, even though we, his contemporary Western readers, often would not (e.g., witchcraft or the work of an evil spirit). And further, he invokes our imagination and reminds us of how life *could* be by describing forms of life, that are neither to be found in the human past nor in our present, but that could exist if for instance nature changed or if we decided to change our way of living.

Furthermore, Wittgenstein does put tremendous stress on human freedom in his writings. He repeatedly points to situations in which humans are not forced to “go a certain way” for instance in following rules, in applying concept and in the creation of novel concepts and practices (see e.g. Z: § 331; PI: §§ 138–242; RFM: Part 1, §§ 34, 51, 113, 116). These are situations where we, when reflecting on the human lifeworld, are often tempted to believe we are forced by underlying and causally determining forces, but where humans can in fact choose to “go another way”. An example of such freedom discussed above was that the discovery of a causal link between cars and bad health would not force us to change our practice of using cars, though we can say it gives us reasons to do so.

This stress on freedom, however, does not entail that Wittgenstein lacks a concept of dynamics that can force language-games to change. His example of a change in nature leading to a

change in the pricing practice of cheese is an example of a dynamic forcing our practice to change, whether we will have it or not. Further, he also shows that if nature were to change in radical ways, so would a great deal of our practices and ways of life (see e.g. PI: §§ 480–486; OC: §§ 513–619). Nothing in Wittgenstein’s work suggests that he denies the reality of causation or denies that causal dynamics in some cases force changes in individual lives, human practices and forms of life. He does not also not deny that we, in our roles as e.g. historians, social scientists or natural scientists can successfully and legitimately explain some changes in and of the human lifeform by referring to underlying causal dynamics. As a philosopher, however, he is not in the business of providing this kind of explanations of changes. He is in the business of investigating, solving and dissolving conceptual problems and of helping us achieve conceptual clarity and perspicuous representations, among other things (PI: §§ 89–133; Z: § 458).

It is also misleading to say that Wittgenstein does not acknowledge the transformative role conflicts may play in altering practices. It is true that he does not write much about e.g. instances of conflicting economic, religious or political interests that lead to changes in ways of living, nor does he offer his reader thick and detailed descriptions of actual culture meetings and the resulting changes as does, for instance, Jonathan Lear in his book *Radical Hope* (Lear 2008). On the other hand, Wittgenstein’s writings do contain several philosophical investigations of culture and language-game conflicts and their possible effects, as the aforementioned example of “Oracle vs laws of physics”-culture clash shows. In other words, Ackermann’s critiques of Wittgenstein’s conception of the dynamics of practice change may be somewhat unfair and sometimes off-target.

Irreducibly Pluralistic

As we have seen in the foregoing discussion, Wittgenstein addresses different ways in which concepts, practices, and forms of life can change. The examples contain *causal* dynamics and *non-causal* drives of change. Examples of the latter are when humans – as individuals or as a collective – decide to make a change. They may do so for

reasons (as in the case of Ibsen's Nora) or purely *spontaneously* (as in the spreading of a certain fad). Humans can create a change in practices *intentionally* (as when I alter my weed-removal strategy in light of new information), but also *unintendedly*, e.g. as a side-effect to something they do (as in Wittgenstein's example of the removal of illnesses caused by the use of cars). Change can also come about due to *a mixture* of causal forces and human actions based on particular reasons (as when we try to adapt our form of life to a new pandemic or address climate changes).

One further way of making this point is to recognize "explanation" as a family resemblance concept and say that humans have developed different explanation-language-games (Winch 2008: 15–17, 67–88). This would mean there is not a single characteristic common to everything we call "an explanation". Instead there is a complicated, criss-crossing pattern consisting of similarities and differences (PI: § 66–69). Some forms of explanation language-games are found mainly in the natural sciences, some in the social sciences, others still in religious practices, and most of them in some form in our everyday life. There is thus a categorical difference between explaining human behaviour in terms of causal dynamics, such as mutations in the human genome or a tumour in the brain, and explaining it in terms of motivational dynamics, such as a political or religious motivation to do something (PI: §§325, PI II: 114–115; OC: § 474). Both can be explanations of why some event happens, and both can be either wrong or right concerning a given situation. But they are two different forms of explanation belonging to two different language-games with each their aims, rules, conditions and criteria.

Which explanation-language-game we ought to play, when seeking to understand a particular change, depends on the context and kind of phenomenon, we are investigating. If I want to understand why my 6-year old transformed from glad to sulky one day, it would be out of place as my first reaction to take her to a neurologist and ask to get her brain scanned to see if a tumour affected her mood, rather than sitting down and asking her if anything was bothering her. Conversely, if she started to have regular fits, falling unconscious on the floor with her whole body shaking

violently, it would be odd to ask her to explain why she was having these fits, instead of taking her to see a doctor.¹¹

The understanding of the dynamics of change found in Wittgenstein’s writings can be characterized as complex and *irreducibly pluralistic*. This entails that he recognises a variety of different kinds of dynamics and does not claim that there is a single fundamental dynamic, or unique set of dynamics, by which all changes can be properly explained. If one were to insist, for instance, that any change occurring in the culinary world must have evolved as the result of struggles between chefs hoping to win fame and fortune, one would – it seems – distort the phenomena one is interested in understanding by overlooking that they are also sometimes motivated by playfulness and experimental curiosity; by the wish to create joy and elevation for their restaurant guests; by the aim to perfect or transform the culinary tradition they spring from; by the hope of promoting cultural understanding and tolerance; by the attempt to incarnate beauty; by the desire to pioneer new ways of creating food, new understandings of what food is, and new ways of dealing with such issues as animal welfare, economy, climate change, health and sustainability, etc. Wittgenstein’s conceptual reminders can, I believe, help us avoid being trapped by reductionistic images of the evolution of human life.

I have argued that the picture that emerges from Wittgenstein’s work regarding how various sorts of changes occur is *irreducibly pluralistic*. I will now evoke two further aspects of this picture, namely that changes can arise in what I term “holistic” as well as “organic” ways, something which the earlier set of reminders were not able to bring out, as they were highlighting particular dynamics.¹²

Holistic Developments

¹¹ Wittgenstein’s ideas have been brought to bear on the classical discussions, originating in Weber’s work, over whether the social sciences should aim for “Verstehen”/”understanding” (consult e.g. Winch, Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock) or “Erklärung”/”explanation” (e.g. Barnes, Bloor, Collin) – or both (a more common stance in the social sciences today, according to Pleasants (1997: 145, 151; 2019: 1)).

¹² The claim below is not that “holistic” or “organic” developments are traits of all changes, only of some. The terms “pluralistic”, “holistic” and “organic” are ones I apply to Wittgenstein’s work, not ones he himself uses.

Who knows the laws according to which society unfolds? I am sure even the cleverest has no idea. (CV: 69).

E.g. nothing [is] more stupid than the chatter about cause & effect in history books; nothing more wrong-headed, more half-baked. (CV: 71)

Despite these dismissive words directed at explanations found in history books, the cases we have thus far considered testify that Wittgenstein clearly thinks it possible, in some situations at least, to locate a particular cause and the effect it had. In our earlier discussion, we saw that Wittgenstein explains changes to pedagogical practices in schools as the result of changing values and ideals regarding childhood. When one consults some of the historical research into this change, however, the contours of a much more complex evolution start to become visible, providing a context from which to understand why one might be tempted to write: “nothing can be more stupid than the chatter about cause and effect in history books”.

During the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, the understanding of childhood changed in major ways, as did the economy, the military situations, the political structures, many moral values and ideals, and a host of other things in Western countries (see e.g. Stearns 2006: 6; Cunningham 2012: 367–369; Fass 2013: 3–7; Grahn-Farley 2013: 1, 43–46, 106–121). It is correct to say schooling practices were changed due to changed ideals, but they were also changed for many other reasons, like new knowledge of child psychology and a political wish to raise democratic citizens in order to bolster against the raise of communism and fascism. Furthermore, the dynamics leading to the shift seem, to some extent, to have a “chicken-and-egg”-character, making it tricky, perhaps even impossible to state what initially led to what. Did our ideals and understanding of childhood change because of new insights gained from scientific research into child psychology, which documented, say, the harmfulness of physical and humiliating punishment, or did we pursue these scientific investigations because our ideals and conceptions with respect to childhood had already changed, thereby making such research a meaningful option? It is possible that there

is no “either/or-answer” to be given here, if these dynamics were intertwined and mutually influencing each other. If this was the case, we cannot in this and similar cases “disentangle the personal, social, economic, and cultural factors”, to borrow Bicchieri’s image (Bicchieri 2017: 1).

In some cases what presents itself is a complicated weave of *entangled* and *mutually* affecting factors that create change. Here it makes little or no sense to single out any element as *the* main dynamic responsible for bringing about the change, because the dynamics are merging, and the change emerges from the situation *as a whole*. This kind of change can be termed a holistic development. Large-scale evolution in societies and forms of life often seems to be holistic in this way. We can say of them: “This, too, admits of being ‘*explained*’ and not explained.” (RF: 123). “Explained” because we *can* point to certain dynamics as playing an important role in creating the change – and “not explained” because of the chicken-and-egg-entanglement of the dynamics and because the whole context was *equally* necessary for these dynamics to be able to create the change.

This notion of “explained and not explained” brings us to the next aspect of Wittgenstein’s thinking to be considered, which the above set of reminders did also not display.

Organic Growth

A salient trait of the later Wittgenstein’s philosophical work is the attempts to counter “over-rationalistic” conceptions of human life as well as the human, all-too-human urge to give explanations and justifications for everything. It is a tendency he criticizes in no uncertain terms: “Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought to regard the facts as “proto-phenomena”.” (PI: § 654), or as he puts it elsewhere, “Our disease is one of wanting to explain” (RFM: Part 6, 31).¹³ I believe this aspect is also crucial to understanding his conception of changes in, and of, forms of life:

¹³ See also PI: §§ 1, 139, 198, 211, 212, 217, 289, 325, 326, 467, 471, 482, 484, 343, 345; OC: §§ 94, 103, 110, 148, 150, 166, 204, 232, 248, 358, 359, 474, 475, 509; RF: 119–155; Z: §§ 314, 391, 700; RFM: Part 1: 34, Part 3: 74, 78, Part 6: 24, 28, 31, Part 7: 10, 17, 23, 40.

You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life. (OC: § 559)

That the language-games – and our life – “is here”, beyond reasonable and unreasonable and “so to say is something unpredictable”, entails that it does not always make sense to look at the evolution of the human life-world as something which can, or should be, explained. The question “Why did this happen?”, and the craving for causes or reasons to explain a given change, can be misplaced. Sometimes we are “wrongly expecting an explanation” (Z § 314). We do so not because the dynamics are hidden from us, and not because the matter is too complicated to sort out, but because in some cases an explanation is uncalled for (as in the first remark quoted below) – or in others it lacks sense (as in the example of the second and third remarks cited below):¹⁴

I see a picture; it represents an old man walking up a steep path leaning on a stick. – How? Might it not have looked just the same if he had been sliding downhill in that position? Perhaps a Martian would describe the picture so. I don’t need to explain why *we* don’t describe it so. (PI: § 139, boxed remark b)

What does man think for? What is it good for? [...] (PI: § 466)

Does man think, then, because he has found that thinking pays? – Because he thinks it advantageous to think? (Does he bring his children up because he has found it pays?) (PI: § 467)

Wittgenstein’s string of questions in the latter two quotes leads his reader “from unobvious nonsense to obvious nonsense” (PI: § 464). We can explain particular instances of thinking as something that is undertaken because it has proved advantageous to do so in similar instances – such as, when we have learned to “think before speaking, when angry” (see also PI: § 469–70). It would, however, be an absurd over-rationalization to explain *all* forms of thinking this way, as most of the time humans think exactly in the same way as they breathe – as part of their spontaneous existence as the kind of creatures they are.

¹⁴ PI: §§ 139, 326, 466–471; PI II: § 343; RF: 121–123; Z: § 314–315.

In order to do justice to the “beyond reasonable and unreasonable” forms of development, what is called for is letting go of the idea of “a need for an explanation” and of the image of “underlying change-creating dynamics”: “Here one can only *describe* and say: this is what human life is like” (RF: 121). In these cases, we are perhaps better helped by looking at the evolution of our ways of living through the image of the organic, blind growth and decay of a wild forest, as this to a lesser degree leads to a demand for an explanation of the change.¹⁵

To sum up: I have characterized the understanding of the dynamics of change emerging from Wittgenstein’s later writings by emphasizing three characteristics: Firstly, the dynamics are *irreducibly pluralistic*; secondly, some developments are *holistic*, and lastly, some development in forms of life unfold *organically*, i.e. in ways “beyond being explainable or unexplainable”. In the last section, I look at some of the consequences of this understanding of change for the project of developing a general explanatory theory of the dynamics of change, and the hope of future progress in combatting harmful beliefs, traditions and practices.

5. Consequences for Change Creation

The idea that changes – either all historical changes or certain forms of changes like scientific or moral revolutions – can, and should be explained with reference to fundamental, recurring dynamics, is an alluring and culturally influential image. An example of it can be found in Lynn Hunt’s work:

In short, I am insisting that *any account* of historical change *must* in the end account for the alteration of individual minds. For human rights to become self-evident, ordinary people *had* to have new understandings that came from new kinds of feelings. (Hunt 2008: 34, my italics)

The attraction of this image is that, if it were possible to locate the dynamics either necessary or generally responsible for changes,

¹⁵ See Hopf (2018) for similar considerations. A difference between the “spontaneous” development mentioned in section 3 and an “organic” development is that in the latter case an explanation lacks sense, but we can explain an action by saying, e.g., “He did it because he is a spontaneous person”.

we would then have a powerful tool for producing future transformations in harmful beliefs, traditions and institutions – we would know which handles to turn (see e.g. Appiah 2010: xvii, 170–172). However, the conception of change in the later Wittgenstein’s writing suggests we should have some reservations about this hope.

The first way these writings raise doubt about the prospects of a general theory of the dynamics of change is by presenting a range of different dynamics, none of which are assigned the role as the fundamental and universally recurring change-creating dynamic. If our concept of a dynamic responsible for change is irreducibly pluralistic (i.e. if “explanation” is a family resemblance concept), then we have a *prima facie* reason to be sceptical towards any theory promising universal, or even very general, “handles to turn” in order to bring about changes to the human life-world, as any such theory would very likely over-simplify human life.¹⁶

Secondly, it also does so by entailing the possibility of holistic developments: that some changes happen because of the situation as a whole and not only because of certain primary causes. This means that, even if it is possible to establish that a type of cultural change occurring in the past was driven by certain main dynamics, if the changes in question were holistic ones, we may not be able to induce the same change in another time or place by simply turning these same handles. For both the UK and Denmark, there is evidence suggesting that the more widespread cultural acceptance of homosexuality, which emerged during the end of the last century, was mainly due to the legal decriminalization of homosexuality (Green 2013; Viskum 2015). Despite this, using law as a means of changing the conception of homosexuality and related practices of maltreating homosexuals in other societies might nonetheless prove utterly ineffective, because the surrounding historic, political, cultural, economic, and religious context is different.

Thirdly, the conception is also discouraging given the human capacity to act spontaneously which, in principle, makes parts of our

¹⁶ If theories of this kind are presenting a false, oversimplified or in other ways distorted image of human life, then this is something that would need to be shown from case to case and cannot be proven “once and for all” (OC: § 37). I investigate one such theory of how moral revolutions happen in Eriksen (2019).

future inherently open and unpredictable. All of this speaks against any high hopes for finding the kind of knowledge of the past that translates into a general explanatory theory of change enabling us to control our future.

At the same time, nothing speaks against finding less-general forms of empirical knowledge of the dynamics leading to past changes, which can guide and help the creation of future change; something we can put to morally legitimate as well as illegitimate uses. An example of the former could be Appiah's suggestions – based on his research into the history of the dynamics of past moral revolutions – of transforming the concept of honour in ways that would undermine the practice of honour-killing (Appiah 2010: xi-xix; 137–172). An example of the latter could be the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal, where predictions and psychological profiles based on data about 50 million Facebook users' "clicking-habits" in the past was utilized to target some users with tailored political slogans and images. It is assumed that their future votes and the outcome of the American presidential election in 2016 was thus manipulated. Wittgenstein, though, seems to suggest that our hope for creating progress is better invested in our willingness to hope and fight for it:

Who knows the laws according to which society unfolds? I am sure even the cleverest has no idea. If you fight, you fight. If you hope, you hope. Someone can fight, hope & even believe, without believing *scientifically*.
(CV: 69)

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