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“Grasping the Difficulty in its Depth’: Wittgenstein and Globally-Engaged Philosophy”

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Abstract: In recent years, philosophers have used expressions of Wittgenstein’s (e.g. “language-games,” “form of life,” and “family resemblance”) in attempts to conceive of the discipline of philosophy in a broad, open, and perhaps global way. These Wittgenstein-inspired approaches indicate an awareness of the importance of cultural and historical diversity for approaching philosophical questions. While some philosophers have taken inspiration from Wittgenstein in embracing contextualism in philosophical hermeneutics, Wittgenstein himself was more instrumental than contextual in his treatment of other philosophers; his focus in his writings was on his own philosophical problems. Does this mean that Wittgensteinian philosophy is a poor resource after all for comparative, cross-cultural, or globally-engaged philosophy (i.e. if it is properly Wittgensteinian)? In this article, I examine the relevance of Wittgenstein to contextually-sensitive philosophy through studies of his conceptions of history and culture, his interest in Spengler’s philosophy of history, and recent scholarship by Hans-Johann Glock and Hans Sluga on the place of contextualism in

Wittgenstein's analysis of philosophical problems. Ultimately, this article advances the view that there are strong resources in Wittgenstein's philosophy for those seeking a more globally-engaged approach to the field.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Metaphilosophy, Cross-Cultural Philosophy, Philosophy of History, Hermeneutics

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Recent years have seen an increase in philosophical work concerning comparative, cross-cultural and globally-engaged philosophy.¹ Metaphilosophical reflection on the nature and boundaries of philosophy has become more common (e.g. Schilbrack 2014, Van Norden 2017). At the same time, some philosophers working in comparative philosophy, Wittgenstein, or both have noted potential contributions Wittgenstein might make to a

¹ For the purpose of this article, I refer to "comparative," "cross-cultural," and "globally-engaged" philosophy roughly interchangeably. Globally-engaged philosophy will at times be both comparative and cross-cultural; comparative philosophy is also cross-cultural and may be globally-engaged. Cross-cultural philosophy should be open to the broad family of philosophical traditions (hence, globally-engaged). Throughout the article, I will alternate among the expressions, but at all times, one might imagine the three together.

philosophical conversation taking into consideration a wide variety of traditions and approaches (e.g. Peterman 2015).

Traces of Wittgenstein's influence in comparative or otherwise globally-engaged philosophy can be found in a certain vocabulary that has entered into the discourse. For example, in philosophy of religion, the terms "language-game" and "form of life" appeared initially in arguments to account for the meaningfulness of so-called "religious language" over against naturalist criticisms of apparently meaningless instances of language; this approach to philosophy of religion, drawing extensively on Wittgenstein's thought, originated with Rush Rhees and then came to include Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch. (Clack 1999, 78; Bloemendaal 2006, 106). The idea was that "religious language" could be meaningful so long as it was used in language-games sufficiently embedded within a form of life. As philosophy of religion grew more pluralistic, these terms were then used to describe the varying discursive contexts and cultural backgrounds that could make religious language meaningful (Winch 1958, 101; Clayton 2006, 81). In the 1970s, the expression "family resemblance" began to appear in theories of religion, in order to convey an open, non-essentialist way of representing the diversity of traditions (Smart 1973); this general approach to conceiving of the concept continues to be influential today (Harrison 2006, Nongbri 2013). In comparative philosophy, one sometimes sees "philosophy" itself grasped as a family resemblance term (Defoort 2001); at other points, more concrete terms (i.e. terms of comparison) are the ones that are understood as bearing a family resemblance (van Brakel and Ma 2015).

While there is much to admire in these efforts to expand the cultural range of philosophy, complicating the matter is Wittgenstein's own ambivalence towards the work of other philosophers. His readings of other philosophers tend to be sporadic, not systematic and

frequently instrumental rather than hermeneutical.² Indeed, Wittgenstein comes to seem to be an inauspicious *model* for contextually-sensitive philosophy. Might one be better off proceeding with contextually-sensitive globally-engaged philosophy without appealing to Wittgenstein (among others)?³ In this article, I propose an argument for why Wittgenstein's overall approach to philosophy – and not just a key concept or two from his writings – is useful for efforts aimed at broadening the field and conducting comparative studies.

In what follows, this article seeks to articulate the relevance of Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy for endeavors aimed at global engagement in philosophy. The goal is *not* to describe a universal philosophical method; the goal is instead to describe a problem-focused approach to comparative philosophy that appeals to contexts, for example, in order to better understand the salient dynamics of problems that might otherwise be overlooked. Wittgenstein's focus on philosophical problems as the locus of philosophical activity animates his appeals to contexts; however, just as important is Wittgenstein's own tendency to scrutinize his own philosophical aims and presuppositions. Therefore, I argue that a Wittgensteinian approach to globally-engaged philosophy would likewise focus on the problems that arise, not just in the broad history of philosophy, but also in the contemporary

² On this, see Sluga, 1998; Sluga, 2013; and Glock, 2006. Wittgenstein was interested in other thinkers because they helped him think through *his own* problems; this is particularly visible with respect to his use of Plato (Perissinotto 2013 and Kienzler 2013), especially in connection with distinguishing what he was doing *as philosophy* from what Plato did. (Perissinotto 2013, 49) Wittgenstein gravitated to thinkers with whom he shared a sense of ethical seriousness or sincerity (e.g. Augustine and Kierkegaard). M. F. Burnyeat argues that Wittgenstein may well have known that Augustine's considered views on language and naming bore resemblances to Wittgenstein's and thus that Wittgenstein may have seen a resemblance between his own philosophical project and that of Augustine (Burnyeat 1987, 24). Wittgenstein found Augustine useful for thinking through aspects of the phenomenology of the will (Richter 2018) while he also found Kierkegaard helpful for considering his own views on Christianity and the overarching ethical dynamics of his own approach to philosophy. (Schönbaumsfeld 2007). While Wittgenstein did not write about other philosophers in a contextually-sensitive way, he did gesture towards it in some writings—especially to counter shallow interpretations of temporally or culturally distant cultural practices (and, perhaps, thinkers); this is seen most strongly in the “Remarks of Frazer's Golden Bough.” (Wittgenstein 1993)

³ John Clayton demurred at points in mentioning Wittgenstein's name in his cross-cultural philosophy of religion (Clayton 2006, 3).

encounters between philosophers from different contexts (i.e. problems of cross-cultural and inter-traditional encounter and interpretation).

The structure of this argument is divided into four sections. The first part considers what Wittgenstein wrote about the concepts of history and culture. The second part considers the influence of Spengler philosophy of history on Wittgenstein's understanding of philosophy. The third part explores to what extent Wittgenstein's methods are consistent with forms of contextualism, and the fourth reflects constructively on what relevance Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy might have for efforts aimed at global-engagement in the field.

1. Wittgenstein and the Concepts of History and Culture

These appearances of Wittgensteinian terminology point to Wittgenstein's apparent relevance to comparative and historical studies in philosophy and religious studies but also prompt a question about Wittgenstein's philosophy itself: if Wittgenstein's philosophy is so useful to contextually-sensitive philosophy, then why was his philosophy not more contextually-sensitive? One can see an instrumental approach to philosophers across his writings. For example, the translation Wittgenstein used of Plato's dialogues was a popular, non-scholarly German edition. (Kienzler 2013, 29) According to Kienzler, when Wittgenstein wrote down quotations from the dialogues, he appears to have condensed text, and infrequently refers to Stephanus notation, which in any case, his edition lacked except in an appendix. Wittgenstein's several references to Augustine in *Philosophical Investigations* also show an instrumental, even if also respectful use. While scholars differ over whether Wittgenstein was fair to Augustine or not, my point is that Wittgenstein did not engage in

contextual reading of Augustine in his *writings* (even if such contextualism informed his own appreciative understanding of Augustine).⁴

In considering this question, it is helpful first to examine remarks Wittgenstein has about history and culture. Taking “history” first, references to it appear across Wittgenstein’s corpus, and a number of themes link them. First, Wittgenstein is at pains in the early texts to distinguish the logical from the historical when it comes to language. Consider the following remark from the *Notebooks 1914-1916*: “What has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world!” (Wittgenstein 1998c [1961], 82) In *Philosophical Remarks*, Wittgenstein writes: “But the natural history of the use of a word can’t be any concern of logic.”

(Wittgenstein 1998d [1964], 59) Later in his philosophical career, Wittgenstein is less concerned with distinguishing the logical from the historical. (c.f. Sluga 2017) Indeed, imagining a counter-factual history of the development of an instance of language use (e.g. in mathematics) is something he finds useful to clarifying the sources of philosophical problems in §80 in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*: “It is often useful, in order to help clarify a philosophical problem, to imagine the historical development, e.g. in mathematics, as quite different from what it actually was. If it had been different no one would have had the idea of saying what is actually said.” (Wittgenstein 1998e [1956], 210) This remark may

⁴ Wittgenstein’s references to Augustine to *Philosophical Investigations* are not exegetical and problematize Augustine’s words, and this has led some interpreters to conclude that Wittgenstein was not sympathetic to Augustine’s philosophical aims (despite Wittgenstein’s evident admiration for him). Cavell, for example, writes that Wittgenstein finds Augustine’s account of learning to speak “important but unsatisfactory.” (Cavell 1966, 183) *Philosophical Investigations* is frequently read as depicting Augustine as a foil against which Wittgenstein develops his own view of language (i.e. the “use theory” of meaning over against the “picture theory” of meaning). Yet, some readers of Wittgenstein have challenged this view and offered a more nuanced reading of the Augustine quotation and its role in *Philosophical Investigations*. For example David G. Stern writes (of Warren Goldfarb’s reading of the Augustine passages): “[T]he aim of these opening words is not to show us that Augustine’s conception of language is wrong and Wittgenstein’s right, but to throw us off balance, and so get us to see the unclarity of the very idea of what it is to have a conception of language, that the same words can be understood in both a commonplace and a philosophical way...For Augustine’s words can also be read as intimating a number of different conceptions of how language works, conceptions that can provide a starting point for philosophical theorizing about language and meaning.” (Stern 2002, 436)

seem to support a contextually-sensitive approach, but it is not in the service of historical curiosity; instead it is in the service of clarifying and resolving a philosophical problem.⁵

References to the “natural history” of language or of human beings appear repeatedly, especially in later texts. Consider, for example, the account in §23 of *Philosophical Investigations* about the variety of language-games: “Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.” (Wittgenstein 2001, 12) Wittgenstein has shifted from considering the logic of a statement, something that history has no bearing on, to considering the human condition as background to a statement, something to which history very broadly conceived (i.e. “natural history”) is relevant; yet, as Hans Sluga observes, while this shift may lead to an acknowledgment of history, it does not lead to an interest in it (Sluga 2017).

A number of references to history appear in *On Certainty*. For example, consider §310-312 which describe an encounter between a teacher and a pupil doubting the reliability of history (Wittgenstein 1969, 40). The pupil doubts various hinge propositions that the teacher accepts as certain, that form the ground of the teacher’s whole epistemic approach to the world. One such belief, that the earth has a history, is a key example for Wittgenstein. Yet, Wittgenstein doubts the sincerity of the putative student in the example. There is so much that “connects up with” the hinge proposition that the student’s doubts seem to him “hollow” (Wittgenstein 1969, 40). But of course, not all doubts are hollow.

References to “culture” take a few different forms in Wittgenstein’s writings. Sometimes, Wittgenstein refers to “culture” in service of a broader point about philosophical method or criticism of contemporary Western civilization being culturally moribund. Consider the following from 1929 in *Culture and Value* [1978/1980]:

⁵ Consider also remark 77 from *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics*, qtd. in Winch (1964: 314).

I often wonder whether my cultural ideal is a new one, i.e. contemporary, or whether it comes from the time of Schumann. At least it strikes me as a continuation of that ideal, though not the continuation that actually followed it then. That is to say, the second half of the 19th Century has been left out. This, I ought to say, has happened quite instinctively & and was not the result of reflection.” (Wittgenstein 1998b, 4)

Note here that the term “culture” carries a normative dimension (“my cultural ideal”). This passage conveys not so much an anthropological sense of “culture” as it does an aesthetic sense (i.e. as the root of creative and intellectual achievement). In 1930, Wittgenstein writes, “I once said, & perhaps rightly: The earlier culture will become a heap of rubble & finally a heap of ashes; but spirits will hover over the ashes.” (Wittgenstein 1998b, 5) Here again we see “culture” referring to a root or ground of human achievement (as what perhaps has been lost in Western civilization). This idea is perhaps continuous with the views of Oswald Spengler, whose well-known two volume book, *The Decline of the West* (1918/1922) influenced Wittgenstein.⁶

The anthropological sense of culture appears at times in Wittgenstein’s later writings. For example, in the *Blue and Brown Books*, Wittgenstein refers to “culture” in order to bring to mind a comprehensive situation of language use: “Imagine a use of language (a culture)...” (Wittgenstein 1998a [1958], 134). References to “culture” here and elsewhere point to the background against which understanding of a language-game may vary.

(Wittgenstein 1998e, 133) Here, “culture” plays a neutral, hermeneutical role in

Wittgenstein’s depiction of an instance of language. Yet, it is notable that even here,

Wittgenstein mainly *refers* to “culture”; he does not *engage* in actual description in detail of a

⁶ In a remark from 1931, Wittgenstein lists a number of figures who have influenced him. Spengler is there alongside physicists like Ludwig Boltzmann and Heinrich Hertz and fellow philosophers Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege (Wittgenstein 1998b, 16).

way of life in order to fill out the actual role of an expression within, e.g., a language-game. References to context are more a matter of thought experiment than an agenda for the empirical study of actual use of language.

One might be inclined here to appeal to the “Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough” as an example of contextual-sensitivity. After all, this text provides a sustained picture of Wittgenstein considering problems of understanding cultural and religious practices as described by Sir James George Frazer. There, Wittgenstein’s primary objective is to lay bare what he sees as arrogance in Frazer’s depiction of “primitive” cultural life. Wittgenstein famously writes:

Frazer’s account of the magical and religious views of mankind is unsatisfactory: it makes these views look like *errors*.

Was Augustine in error, then, when he called upon God on every page of the *Confessions*?

But—one might say—if he was not in error, surely the Buddhist holy man was—or anyone else—whose religion gives expression to completely different views. But *none* of them was in error, except when he set forth a theory. (Wittgenstein 1993: 119).

This passage suggests a contextually-sensitive approach to studying Augustine, Buddhist exemplars, or magical and religious views generally. What is to be avoided is presenting human practices as “pieces of stupidity” (119), a Wittgensteinian gloss on the principle of charity. Yet, Wittgenstein is using this contextualism not for his own study of cultural and religious practices, but to counter the perceived arrogance of another scholar (Frazer).

Wittgenstein lays the groundwork—here and elsewhere—for empirical investigation of contexts in order to avoid projections of one’s own ideology, but he does not *engage* in such

investigation. As for why Wittgenstein's philosophy was not more contextually-sensitive, it is difficult to say, but perhaps he did not think that the philosophical problems he wished to address required contextual-sensitivity. That being said, the appreciation for contextual-sensitivity in Wittgenstein's philosophy coincides with his reading of Oswald Spengler. Closer focus on Spengler's influence on Wittgenstein may help to better grasp Wittgenstein's concepts of history and culture and how they bear on addressing philosophical problems.

2. Wittgenstein and Spengler

Spengler's *The Decline of the West* presents a comprehensive argument against a unitary and progressive teleological view of history, with the contemporary West as the preeminent exemplar of culture and civilization. Instead, Spengler offered an organic metaphor for cultures growing aimlessly, changing, and declining. Brian R. Clack and William J. Deangelis both emphasize in particular the importance of reading Wittgenstein as a philosopher of "decline," that is to say, as a philosopher who sees his thought as opposed to the values and direction of his era (Clack 1999, Deangelis 2007).⁷ One can see this already in passages as just seen from *Culture and Value* and in the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, which refer to "the darkness of this time" (Wittgenstein 2001, ix). The metaphor of cultural decline suggests diminishment but also death. Wittgenstein writes of work during a time of cultural decline:

Culture is like a great organization which assigns to each of its members his place, at which he can work in the spirit of the whole, and his strength can with a certain

⁷ Clack writes, "Wittgenstein's transformation of philosophy into a method for destroying metaphysics seems, then, to have been enacted on Spenglerian advice. And if Wittgenstein's view of the nature of philosophy was dictated by his reading of Spengler, then it is not unlikely that he would have been of the opinion that religion too is at the mercy of culture's decline, and that faith was no longer a living option in 'the darkness of this time', a time in which science dominates and sends our wondering spirit to sleep" (Clack 1999, 129). For more on the notion of "decline" in Wittgenstein's philosophy, see Cavell 1989, Clack 1999, and DeAngelis 2007.

justice be measured by his success as understood within that whole. In a time without culture, however, forces are fragmented and the strength of the individual is wasted through the overcoming of opposing forces & frictional resistances; it is not manifest in the distance travelled but rather perhaps in the heat generated through the overcoming of frictional resistances. (Wittgenstein 1998b, 8-9)

Lively culture is distinguished from moribund civilization, and one has the sense that Wittgenstein sees European civilization as having lost its connection with its earlier expressions—“the disappearance of a culture” (Wittgenstein 1998b, 9).

In rejecting a progressive teleology with the West at the apex of cultural history, Spengler does not embrace a stochastic view of history, where the lack of laws or an overarching narrative entails random changes. In writing of decline, Spengler anticipates the future:

Thus our theme, which originally comprised only the limited problem of present day civilization, broadens itself into a new philosophy—the philosophy of the future, so far as the metaphysically exhausted soil of the West can bear such, and in any case the only philosophy which is within the possibilities of the West-European mind in its next stages. It expands into the conception of a morphology of world history, of the world-as-history in contrast to the morphology of the world-as-nature that hitherto has been almost the only theme of philosophy.” (Spengler 1926, 5)

In order to analyze the phenomenon of the decline of Western culture (perhaps even to have eyes to see the phenomenon), Spengler develops a comprehensive philosophy of history.

“Morphology” is concerned with the study of forms, but especially over time or in different conditions. The expression “world-as-history” sees historical development as the ground from which the study of phenomena (forms) might be interpreted as opposed to the “world-

as-nature”, where it is natural phenomena that provides the ground for explanation of higher-order phenomena. The difference between the two is between morphology as the interpretation of history or of nature. The morphological study of the world-as-history, for Spengler, examines cultures as self-contained existing, living things that are born, grow, flourish, decline, and die; furthermore, it conceives of these stages of development as repeating in the lives of cultures within different contexts. Thus, temporally and culturally distant epochs can resemble each other just as distinct organisms can resemble each other.

Deangelis writes of Spengler’s approach to history:

Spengler held that history, properly practiced, is concerned primarily with *cultures*. It reveals that cultures all develop, mature, decline, and die out in discernibly similar stages. The unfolding of cultures, on his view, constitutes the entire content of history. He is intent to show that all known cultures have developed, flourished, and exhausted themselves in accordance with similar principles, passing through similar sequences of stages. (Deangelis 2007, 8)

The organic metaphor for cultural change over time is a core idea of Spengler’s with respect to history. For Spengler, cultures are like living beings, and as such the history of one culture may resemble the history of another insofar as all cultures are considered as occupying life-stages in development.

Throughout the book, Spengler attacks Darwinism and evolution insofar as they posit mechanisms laying behind the process of history, *determining* its progression. Spengler writes: “These cultures, sublimated life-essences, grow with the same superb aimlessness as the flowers of the field. They belong, like the plants and the animals, to the living Nature of Goethe, and not to the dead Nature of Newton.” (Spengler 1926, 38) This suggests that Spengler opposed evolution in his thought; however, at times he invokes “*Evolution*” (tr.

Evolution) and “*Entwicklung*” (tr. development, progress, or evolution) to describe the change that may take place within a culture. Spengler attacks “Darwinism” directly in *The Decline of the West* (e.g. in a footnote): “Not the dissecting morphology of the Darwinian’s pragmatic zoology with its hunt for causal connexions, but the seeing and overseeing morphology of Goethe.” (Spengler 1926, 104) One can see this anti-Darwinist attitude throughout the text, but it is helpful to examine these criticisms with an eye to understanding Spengler’s own preferred picture of organic development. The “Darwinism” and “evolution” that Spengler attacks is that which he understands to invoke a law of nature that drives change over time, not change as the expression of the lived development of a particular organism.⁸

Wittgenstein read Spengler in the early 1930s, and during roughly this period comes to acknowledge the importance of the background against which language is meaningful or certainties are held. Wittgenstein’s appreciation for contextualism would seem to appear in conjunction with Spengler’s influence on Wittgenstein. Yet, Wittgenstein does not embrace Spengler’s thought without criticism; instead Wittgenstein seems to recommend a creative, imaginative, selective reading of Spengler.⁹ Perhaps as Spengler sees the importance of constructing an overarching philosophy of history to diagnose the cultural decline of early

⁸ An interpretive puzzle thus arises when considering Spengler’s use of the word “evolution” and its variants. Spengler sometimes criticizes “evolution” (likely with a law-like theory in mind), but elsewhere writes of the growth inherent to cultural life as involving “evolution”. Perhaps the latter expressions are presented as alternatives to conceiving of a culture as inherently possessing a particular trait or nature selecting on behalf of the culture for that trait—as if to avoid both essentialism and the nature-centered (natural law) teleology. These references display a complex stance with respect to language and theories of change over time. Perhaps they also reflect the multivalence of terms relating to “evolution” and “Darwinism” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.(c.f. Richards 1992)

⁹ Related to this point, consider Kevin Cahill on Wittgenstein’s critical reception of Spengler (in connection with Rudolf Haller): “As Haller also makes clear, Wittgenstein not only appropriates aspects of Spengler’s method, ‘He reproaches Spengler for repeatedly making the mistake of extending the scope of statements true of the archetype of contemplation to the objects of contemplation.’ (Haller, 1988, p. 84) This idea is particularly significant for what we might want to call the later Wittgenstein’s ‘descriptive morphology’ of language games. What this means is that for Wittgenstein, when we let something function as a prototype (*Urbild*) or paradigm (*Paradigma*) for a language game, then statements about the prototype are not ordinary assertions, but rather grammatical remarks that present to us the form of our discussion.” (Cahill 2001)

twentieth century Western civilization, Wittgenstein sees the value in appealing to contexts of use of expressions to ground the abstracted terms of language that go “on holiday” in philosophical discourse. Wittgenstein also remains a stark contrarian towards those holding to a sense of inevitable progress in the history of Western civilization. Wittgenstein retains a sobriety concerning the possible developments of a culture or nation.¹⁰

Deangelis argues that another difference between Spengler and Wittgenstein concerns cultural insularity. Deangelis observes that Spengler’s “cultural insularity” cannot be ascribed to Wittgenstein even as appreciation of cultural distances is an increasingly salient feature of Wittgenstein’s mature thought (Deangelis 2007, 9f). Indeed, one can see in Peter Winch’s remarks in the preface to the second edition of *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (1958/1990) reflection on the ambiguous heritage of Wittgenstein’s ideas regarding cultural diversity and understanding across boundaries as well as the prudential need to clarify just how porous or water-tight the barriers are between cultures:

[T]he suggestion that modes of social life are autonomous with respect to each other was insufficiently counteracted by my qualifying remark (on p. 101) about ‘the overlapping character of different modes of social life’. Different aspects of social life do not merely ‘overlap’: they are frequently internally related in such a way that one cannot even be intelligibly conceived as existing in isolation from others. (Winch 1990, xv-xvi).

Wittgenstein shares with Spengler the appreciation of the changeable condition of cultures and the serious obstacles as well as the open-ended possibilities of understanding, but that does not entail that Wittgenstein’s reticence forecloses on the possibilities of cross-cultural

¹⁰ Consider here Wittgenstein’s response to Norman Malcolm regarding a supposed British plot to assassinate Hitler, which Malcom remarked was against Britain’s “national character.” Malcolm records that “My remark made Wittgenstein extremely angry. He considered it to be a great stupidity and also an indication that I was not learning anything from the philosophical training that he was trying to give me.” (Malcolm 2001, 30)

understanding or exterior influence on a cultural practice. Indeed, the example mentioned from the *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics* would tell against that sort of culturally insular reading of Wittgenstein.

That being said, charitable interpretations of philosophers and cultural practices are sometimes lacking and can decrease the possibility of communication or understanding. Indeed, the debates themselves over Wittgenstein's, or Wittgensteinians', alleged cultural insularity — whether countenanced in terms like “relativism” or “fideism” — frequently display how a lack of nuance in interpretation can do just that. When terms of classification, such as “fideism,” have a pejorative use, they may invite unfortunate associations onto that which has been classified. One sees this as well with terms that may seem innocent, such as “religion,” which can take on pejorative associations in particular contexts; this is seen pointedly in debates over the classification of Confucianism in Chinese academic and political discourses.¹¹

3. Wittgenstein and Contextually-Sensitive Philosophy

Perhaps few would deny that contextual background is important to understanding an argument or text, but determining what that entails is not obvious. The lure of a grand historical narrative (e.g. evolutionary, Marxist, Spenglerian) is that an argument or text can be definitively interpreted when properly placed within that narrative. This sort of fully comprehensive historicism in its most extreme forms putatively entitles one to grasp an

¹¹ Xiaomei Yang (2008) explores the history of debates over the religion-status of Confucianism from the Rites Controversy between Catholic missionaries and the Chinese Imperial court in the 17th and 18th centuries, to the State Religion Controversy in the late 19th century, to 20th century debates over whether Confucianism is a secular philosophy or a religious (or potentially religious) aspect of traditional Chinese societies that runs counter to goals of Chinese Marxist philosophy. Anna Sun (2013) investigates further the history of classifications of Confucianism, both among Chinese and international scholars. One takeaway from these studies is the critical relevance of the different concepts of religion and religiosity in play as well as the legacy of Western imperial ambitions in East Asia on what may be at stake within classifications of Confucianism.

argument or text without really reading it.¹² When the idea of a grand narrative is set aside, history becomes a problem, and therefore, it can no longer *simply* be used to provide background for an interpretation.

Hans-Johann Glock discusses different approaches to historicism and weighs the reasons for and against them. A strong version of historicism would hold that historical study is an essential part of philosophical activity. Glock judges that strong versions of historicism fall victim to serious problems, such as the genetic fallacy, but Glock would support a more minimal form of historicism. (Glock, 2006, 302) A minimalist version of historicism would hold that “a study of the past is *useful* to philosophy, without being indispensable.” (Glock, 2006, 280) He concludes that “minimalist historicism” is the approach most in line with Wittgenstein’s philosophy. (Glock, 2006, 303) These respects include uncovering forgotten features of our framework that may have disappeared from view, observing and disentangling the conflicting conceptual relations of terms that later have become theoretically linked (such as “force” and “electricity”), and detecting salient differences between distinct iterations of concepts in throughout their history (such as Aristotle’s conception of “*eudaimonia*” and its associations with the modern English word “happiness”). (Glock, 2006, 302-303)

As Hans Sluga has observed, Wittgenstein began his philosophical career with a decidedly “anti-historical” conception of philosophy (Sluga 2017, 417). In the *Notebooks* and *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes of the philosophical perspective being *sub specie aeterni*. About this point of view, Sluga observes,

It is striking that his book is almost completely silent about history, has little to say about time, and depicts, instead, for the most part a world of determinate, static facts and timeless logical relations. There is minimal talk in it of events, processes,

¹² I encounter this sort of strong historicism frequently among students in China.

happenings, action, and life and no talk at all of transformations, transitions, developments, revolutions, conflicts, battles, and warfare. The origin and emergence of the world of facts is not an issue for it. Organic life and its evolution are of no concern to it. (Sluga 2017, 417)

Unlike the *Tractatus*, works from Wittgenstein's later period might seem to offer helpful resources for contextually-sensitive approaches to philosophy, but Sluga reminds readers that Wittgenstein's "reflections on time and history remained limited in scope and depth. He thought more *about* the temporal and historical dimension of human thought than *in* temporal and historical terms." (Sluga 2017, 419) A use-centered, historical-contextual description of a concept, argument, or text might well seem to some readers to flow from Wittgenstein's mature philosophy — the present author included — but that does not mean that these contextual methods are generally found in Wittgenstein's texts.

Despite the apparent inauspiciousness of Wittgenstein's texts as *models* of contextually-sensitive philosophy, several works of Sluga's explore the positive bearing of Wittgenstein on methods and aims in the history of philosophy. In his review of Peter Hacker's *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy*, Sluga reflects on the potential richness history of analytic philosophy would have if it were to draw upon the resources of analytic philosophy in determining its methods and interrogating its classificatory concepts. In recent articles, Sluga raises concerns about dominant trends in history of analytic philosophy, especially what he describes as a "preoccupation" with exegetical investigation of Wittgenstein's writings. While Sluga does seem to admire the achievements of these textual studies, he wants to raise the issue of "what role the exegesis should play in our philosophizing" (Sluga 2013, 13). In criticizing recent trends of Wittgenstein studies, Sluga highlights the *insufficiently analytical methods* employed in some

work in history of philosophy, the *inappropriate aims* of some exegetical scholars, leading to what might be described as the *existential disengagement* of some historians of philosophy. Sluga hopes for philosophical work capable of illuminating big ethical problems relating to the growing global population, the rapid development of new technologies, and the fragility of our natural environment (Sluga, 2013, 24).

It is valuable to draw on both Glock's and Sluga's readings of Wittgenstein on context-sensitivity in philosophy; however, I would argue that a very broad view of what existential engagement might mean is warranted, especially given the urgency of promoting cross-cultural understanding in philosophy. Sluga's invoking the value of existential engagement with "burning questions" is helpful in that it may remind philosophers that they have choices in selecting what to concepts to clarify, what contexts to consider, and what problems are worth their attention. What qualifies as an important issue, calling out for clarification, will vary depending on a philosopher's circumstances, historical and cultural.

In a section §109 of *Philosophical Investigations* exploring the distinction between the precision of logic and the roughness of everyday language, and the capacity of the former to completely grasp the latter, Wittgenstein writes,

We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. (Wittgenstein 2001, 47)

The task for the philosopher is not simply to describe the diversity of forms of language *per se* but to describe the diversity of forms of language that bear on a given philosophical

problem (what gives description its “light”). This is one reason why Wittgenstein’s philosophy, when read alongside historically or culturally distant philosophical texts, would never become strongly historicist: without attention to philosophical problems, there would be no clear motivation and organization to contextually-rich description.

4. The Relevance of Wittgenstein to Globally-Engaged Philosophy

One feature of careful contextual reading is reminding oneself that claims and arguments are made at particular times and locations and are made in connection with intended audiences. One might think that this is too banal a point to merit being mentioned, and yet it is so frequently overlooked. In connection with similar concerns with respect to philosophy of religion, Mikel Burley writes, “A common and thoroughly understandable complaint about much contemporary philosophy of religion is that its scope remains abysmally restricted.” (Burley 2018, 3) To address this tendency towards privileging Christian theism in philosophy of religion, a number of scholars have advanced contextually-sensitive approaches to studying diverse philosophical texts (Clayton 2006, Knepper 2013) and religious phenomena (Burley 2018). These contextually-sensitive approaches especially in the service of giving “thick descriptions” of “reason-giving” can be applied well beyond cross-cultural philosophy of religion to comparative or globally-engaged philosophy generally (Knepper 2013, Burley 2018). Recognition of contextual factors may enable careful readers to avoid unfortunate misunderstandings by perhaps disambiguating what is obscure.¹³

¹³ In relation to Wittgenstein’s “Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough,” Burley writes, “Wittgenstein’s point is not that our understanding of a ritual cannot be enhanced by further contextual information; on the contrary, adding contextual layers is exactly what thick description involves. The point, rather, is to draw a distinction between description and explanation: to urge caution about assuming that what understanding a ritual consists in must be the crafting of an explanatory account, perhaps couched in terms of what the ritual participants intend to achieve. At least in many instances, Wittgenstein is suggesting, such purported explanations may in fact deflect our attention from what is most significant in the ritual, leading us to characterize what is going on in unduly intellectualized terms, as seeking to fulfil an instrumental goal that is external to the ritual itself.” (2018, 13)

So, for example, a term in a text may mean something different to a contemporary reader than what it meant to its author and intended audience. A good example is “religion”; equivocation between contemporary, early modern, or ancient related terms and their meanings would invite misunderstandings that otherwise could have been avoided.¹⁴

Whatever their various causes, philosophical problems seem inevitably to appear; a key motivation for the work of philosophical clarification is that conceptual confusion is a recurrent feature of the human condition. How do philosophical problems originate? In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein gives a variety of answers: language going “on holiday” (§38), an “urge to misunderstand” the workings of our language (§109), “misinterpretation” of language (§111), being “held captive” by a picture (§115), not knowing one’s “way about” (§123). Wittgenstein refers to “perspicuous representations” as resolving philosophical problems (§122): “A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions’. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate cases*.” (Wittgenstein 2001, 51)¹⁵ Yet this should not be read as a philosophical method for all cases of conceptual confusion. Wittgenstein is not advancing a single method for resolving confusion (§133): “There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies.” (Wittgenstein 2001, 51) Careful contextual reading would only be one such method or therapy, but insofar as it might enable

¹⁴ Brent Nongbri (2013) examines the local uses of terms (e.g. “*religio*,” “*thrēskeia*,” and “*dīm*”) found in ancient texts that are frequently translated today as “religion,” arguing that it is misleading to project back in time the modern concept of a religion into the ancient texts. Nongbri writes, “The very idea of ‘being religious’ requires a companion notion of what it would mean to be ‘not religious,’ and this dichotomy was not part of the ancient world. To be sure, ancient people had words to describe proper reverence to the gods, but these terms were not what modern people would describe as strictly ‘religious.’” (Nongbri 2013, 4) For more on challenges to clarity when it comes to use of the term “religion,” see also Harrison 2006 and Schilbrack 2014.

¹⁵ This topic invites numerous interpretations, and whether, for example, perspicuous representations are thought of as elucidatory or therapeutic could have significant implications for Wittgenstein’s relevance to comparative philosophy. Either or both approaches might well have their helpful uses in comparative philosophy. For the purposes of this article, I set aside this issue. See, for example, Baker 2004, Hutchison and Read 2008, and Martin 2016.

seeing connections, or dispel superficial associations, careful contextual reading is a helpful method.

According to Wittgenstein, philosophy clears up that which is confused; it reveals nonsense as nonsense; it seeks out the grammatical background against which a piece of language may be surveyed in order to grasp its significance. While reading Wittgenstein's philosophy *may not compel* an interest in the history of philosophy, or globally-engaged philosophy for that matter, it may encourage skepticism about narrow, self-satisfied narratives about western philosophy or analytic philosophy. Encouraged by other circumstances, such as productive skeptical attitudes might give rise to a more globally-engaged conception of the field. If one is already motivated to study figures or problems from the broad history of philosophy, then Wittgenstein offers a few themes to consider. First, Wittgenstein's philosophical writings invite dialectical reading, where in considering a philosophical problem one may come to question certain presuppositions regarding the framing of that problem. This sort of approach is frequently used across Wittgenstein's corpus, but it is seen perhaps most famously in the opening series of remarks in *Philosophical Investigations* on naming and ostension, but it can also be seen in sources as diverse as the "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough" (interpreting views as theories), the "Lectures on Religious Belief" (on contradicting a person who believes in a Last Judgment), and *On Certainty* (on beliefs, and doubts, being based on trust). Second, Wittgenstein's philosophy pointedly alerts readers to the dangers of smugness and being excessively clever in forming generalizations about the history of philosophy that privilege the present moment. A clear example of this mode of philosophizing is found in "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough", but similar remarks are found throughout Wittgenstein's writings (as collected in *Culture and Value*). Third, Wittgenstein's philosophy – especially as expressed in *Philosophical Investigations* – may

draw to mind not just the diverse contexts in which philosophy may be performed but the varied ends that may be pursued through it (Clayton 2006, 7). Achieving clarity not just about the meanings of expressions and arguments but also about the ends of argumentation, inquiry, or contemplation is itself a philosophical accomplishment. Fourth, Wittgenstein's emphasis on particular problems that arise where language has gotten confused, rather than "classic" philosophical problems implies a broad landscape of philosophical topics – where language concerning matters of importance has grown confused – instead of a narrow sequence of problems rooted in the history of (Western) philosophy. Fifth, awareness of the historical and cultural contingency of diverse iterations of philosophy may invite further awareness of the contingency of one's own philosophical background and assumptions. Sixth, Wittgenstein remarked periodically on the ethical dimensions of his approach to philosophy, that it required courage, honesty, and, in his own way, charity. Perhaps additional ethical and/or epistemic virtues would also play a critical role in philosophical inquiry, especially inquiry aimed at global engagement; here, I might venture interpretive compassion, intellectual humility, and hope in the possibility of understanding would play important roles.

In a remark from 1946 collected in *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein explores the difficulty of genuine philosophical work, of uprooting confused ways of thinking.

Wittgenstein writes:

Grasping the difficulty *in its depth* is what is hard.

For if you interpret it in a shallow way the difficulty just remains. it has to be pulled out by the root; & that means, you have to start thinking about these things in a new way. The change is as decisive e.g. as that from the alchemical to the chemical way of thinking. —The new way of thinking is what is so hard to establish.

Once it is established the old problems disappear; indeed it becomes hard to recapture them. For they are embedded in the way we express ourselves; & if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression, the old problems are discarded along with the old garment. (Wittgenstein 1998b, 55)

Wittgenstein, here, contrasts two instances of clarification: one that is shallow and ineffectual and another that is deep and makes the problems disappear in such a way that “it becomes hard to recapture them.” Philosophical achievements that are shallow fail to overcome confused ways of thinking. Those shallow achievements may be still enmeshed in a historical or cultural situation their authors had sought to elude. “Grasping the difficulty in its depth” not only frees one but also makes the old trap disappear.

When applied to the broad history of philosophy, the problems reverse. If you try to understand alchemy with the resources of chemistry, it is hopeless; and surely, that anyone had been taken in by alchemy will seem utterly foolish. Careful contextual reading would seek to reconstruct how the earlier view had seemed plausible, how “the old problems” captured earlier philosophers’ attention. What makes this so especially difficult is that this reconstruction is accomplished from where one stands historically, culturally, and linguistically. The reconstruction may require determination and humility.

Two cases may help illustrate the usefulness of Wittgenstein’s philosophical approaches for globally-engaged philosophy. First, how to know whether something is a religion or not is a problem increasingly faced in religious studies and also in philosophy of religion. There are clear-cut cases (Christianity) and borderline cases (Confucianism). Depending on context and nuances with respect to the classification, borderline cases may be ascribed religion-status. A philosophical inquiry might begin with uncertainty or anxiety over whether a belief, practice, or institution really is religious; this may be instigated by examples

in textbooks clashing with common-sense attitudes about a tradition.¹⁶ If “religion” is rooted in belief in an ultimate reality, then Confucianism does not fit since “belief” does not play particularly important role in the tradition. About this, sociologist Anna Sun writes, “most [Chinese] people would have found the sentence ‘I am a believer of the Confucian religion’...deeply problematic, even though it is structurally similar to the sentence ‘I am a believer of the Christian religion’.” (Sun 2013, 80) If “religion” is rooted in rituals aimed at reinforcing a moral way of life for a community, then Confucianism may perhaps fit the category. Some Chinese Marxist critics of Confucianism pejoratively classified it as a religion due to factors like “feudal rituals,” “filial piety,” and “reverence to the ruler” effective “preventing the modernization of China.” (Sun 2013, 86) Yet, not all Chinese scholars would use the category of religion in a pejorative way when it comes to Confucianism (Sun 2013, 86). Learning about contexts of ascription of religion-status will help disambiguate such perplexing situations. It is not that the contextualization will remove the difficulty, but it may help one understand what generated the difficulty in particular situations (perhaps over-generalizations from highly localized uses of terms of categorization or inattention to the political dynamics surrounding application of a term, both of which happen readily with “religion”). Even if one cannot decide the issue with a borderline case, such as Confucianism, one can come to understand what the difficulty is with the case.

Second, while one might say contextualism is valuable for a scholar wanting to understand, for example, the 3rd century BCE Confucian thinker Xunzi, such a statement can come off as platitudinous when not indexed to particular philosophical problems. Take the idea that Xunzi has a philosophy of language and that it is found in the chapter on correcting

¹⁶ The vast majority of students I have taught in China strongly reject any idea of Confucianism being a religion. That there are Chinese academic works on the topic comes as a surprise.

names (*zhengming* 正名) in the book that bears his name. Such a thought might lead a scholar to bring together what they know about philosophy of language (e.g. theories of meaning and reference, speech act theory, theories of truth) and to look for where these notions, or something roughly similar to them, appear in the book. Maybe such an approach would have some value; it might inspire novel approaches to established problems in the philosophy of language. Yet, a contextually-thin approach would overlook a host of problems raised in the very framing of the *Xunzi* (e.g. as a *philosophical* text¹⁷ written by a single *author*¹⁸) and its composition (that its structure and content has been somewhat fluid for much of its existence).¹⁹ Regarding the correcting of names, the *Xunzi* reads:

Nowadays, the sage kings have passed away, and the preservation of these names has become lax. Strange words have arisen, the names and their corresponding objects are disordered, and the forms of right and wrong are unclear. As a result, even officers who assiduously preserve the proper models and scholars who assiduously recite the proper order are also all thrown into chaos. If there arose a true king, he would surely follow the old names in some cases and create new names in other cases. Thus, one must examine the reason for having names, the proper means for distinguishing like and unlike, and the essential points in establishing names. (Hutton 2014, 237)

Considering the *Xunzi* as pertaining to “philosophy of language” may also bring to mind its relevance to contemporary philosophical projects. This may well be constructive, but there are dangers of interpretive projection because of the distinct ends pursued in the text: the establishing or restoration of a harmonious social order through practical reflection on the

¹⁷ See Defoort 2001.

¹⁸ See Nylan 2016.

¹⁹ See Sato 2003.

way [道*dao*]). Chris Fraser writes of the *Xunzi*: “The project of formulating an accurate theoretical description of the world—what we might think of as a philosophical orientation centered on truth—was rarely if ever a concern, except insofar as it contributed to identifying the right *dao*.” (Fraser 2016, 292) Of course, references to “Xunzi’s philosophy of language” might also serve to provoke readers to broaden their conceptions of what philosophy of language encapsulates, but it will only be effective at doing so if at the same time it offers a contextually-rich interpretation of the text (c.f. Fraser 2016). When reading the chapter on *zhengming*, one might take note of these dissonances and frustrated expectations, and modifying or withdrawing unsuitable descriptions. When this happens, when one detects that the text is not part of a familiar intellectual activity, working out its own ends and methods (and distinguishing them as needed from one’s own philosophical ends and methods) will help reveal the text in its alterity, and relieve a potential source of confusion. One is then in a position to understand what the text is doing.

5. Conclusion

What qualifies as an important issue, calling out for clarification, will vary depending on the philosopher’s circumstances and how juxtaposed instances of discourse may give rise to confusion. Furthermore, there are countless ways in which globally-engaged philosophers may go about their work of conducting cross-cultural investigations. A Wittgensteinian approach to comparative philosophy is, I argue, especially useful for some of these projects in comparative philosophy, particularly those where presuppositions about the subject matter, one’s own theoretical background, and the nature of philosophy itself threaten to occlude productive philosophical inquiry. While sometimes a Wittgensteinian approach to globally-engaged philosophy would proceed negatively, by highlighting the problems present in

inquiry, it need not end in such negative progress. After all, cross-cultural understanding is possible so long as interlocutors remain engaged in ventures of communication.²⁰

A globally-engaged orientation towards philosophy—something that is warranted in today’s increasingly crowded world and diverse institutions of higher education—might inspire some to learn about philosophers of multiple times, places, and traditions. A significant motivation for the present author is the need for better understanding between movements and traditions of philosophy and religion one finds in China and the United States. But beyond these contexts, lack of clarity about the scope and use of “philosophy” or “religion” is a potential source of confusion with respect to ventures like comparative, cross-cultural, or globally-engaged philosophy (and, of course, that philosophy’s history and cultural contexts). Grasping *that difficulty* in its depth is an old project that goes beyond the scope of the present article but is a project well-deserving of philosophical attention, and one for which Wittgenstein’s philosophical approaches may be useful.

²⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, “The problem of cross-cultural communication can seem immensely difficult in theory, when we are trying to imagine making sense of a stranger in the abstract. But the great lesson of anthropology is that when the stranger is no longer imaginary, but real and present, sharing a human social life, you may like or dislike him, you may agree or disagree; but, if it is what you both want, you can make sense of each other in the end.” (Appiah, 2006, pp. 88–9)

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