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On Wittgenstein and on Genocide

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Abstract

My essay draws attention to several little-known texts by Wittgenstein in which he addresses the processes which may precede a genocide. I seek to demonstrate that Wittgenstein's thought contains resources that may be drawn on in confronting such ethical and political problems, and more specifically, in addressing issues that arise in relation to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The resources I locate in Wittgenstein's work include techniques for shifting attitudes and for redirecting attention, for unsettling interlocutors from their complacency and for leading them to transform their ways of seeing the problems they confront. In this connection, I reflect on the ethical and political efficacy of experiences of the uncanny. I also find in Wittgenstein the suggestion that moral philosophy calls for a mode of engagement which is essentially first-personal, and refuses to separate the biographical from the philosophical. In order to put this suggestion to the test, the essay is written in the idiom of autotheory.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; genocide; Israel; Palestine; deflection; skepticism; the uncanny

1. An Unsettling Analogy

I write these words because I have been unsettled, and came to see things that I could not remain silent about. By sharing these words with you, the reader, I hope that you will be unsettled too; for unsettling, I hope to show, is a genuine mode of ethical engagement. There are reasons, related to the conception of ethics I explore here, which impel me to write in this way—in the first person, in the manner of autotheory. And if there is anything I wish to argue for here, it is this: that by reading Wittgenstein, we can come to understand the need for engaging in this form of essentially personal writing.

It started like this. In May 2025 I was conducting archival work for a different project when I came upon a text written by Wittgenstein in 1945, in postwar Britain. It reads like a draft of an opinion piece to be published in the papers. Here is an excerpt from this text:

> Sir, it is ridiculous to see all the discussion going on about the harmfulness of the gangster films to the young while the minds of both adults & children are being systematically poisoned by the worst [. . .] propaganda. The gloating over dead 'Huns', over the old German cities razed to the ground, over German civilians walking among the ruins of their towns. . . all the well known tricks of the camera & the by far nastier ones of the commentators are set in motion to represent the German people to the unthinking cinema goer as one pack of wolves. The commentators are worthy pupils of Dr. Goebbels, of the worst kind of Germans. We are not writing this letter in what would be a crazy expectation to open the eyes of the blind, but to direct the attention of the seeing to a horrid evil, the lying propaganda, the germ of Nazism itself. (MS151 46–47).[1]

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It all seems so topsy-turvy. Who is speaking here, and with what right? And to whom is he speaking, and why? What could have prompted Wittgenstein, an exiled Austrian, descended from Jews, to write in defense of the defeated Germans? What made this philosopher, known mostly for his work in logic and the philosophy of language, who only rarely wrote about ethics and even less about political philosophy, feel the need to sound this alarm? Isn't Wittgenstein the philosopher who said that "Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language. . . philosophy leaves everything as it is" (PI §124). And this seems to leave little hope for those who seek in his work any support for political involvement.

Another part of the difficulty I experienced, approaching this text, stemmed from my inability to situate Wittgenstein's letter in the historical moment in which it was written. The relevant facts are now mostly forgotten, and indeed we might want to ask ourselves why they have been forgotten—why our historical memory fosters the illusion that such things were confined to Nazi Germany. I soon learned that as the winter of 1945–1946 was approaching, and Germany lay in ruins, there were many in Britain who seriously debated whether the defeated Germans should be left to starve. It was this danger that Wittgenstein was warning against. It was genocide.

In a second unpublished letter written in the same period, Wittgenstein adds:

> . . . Many decent people who feel sick at heart of this 'horror' propaganda . . .really feel
>
> (1) that all these horrors [i.e., the Nazis' crimes] are already being paid for.
>
> (2) that what they demonstrate is not the depravity of the German nation in particular but rather what can happen in a short time in a country in which the worst elements, for whatever reason, rise to the top.
>
> (3) that we can only hope that similar things will not happen in this country.
>
> (4) that if anything can bring this about it is just the base propaganda now inspired by the government.
>
> (5) that nothing good, nothing even profitable to this country, can arise out of an attitude which is at bottom the very attitude of the Nazis only this time directed towards the German nation not towards the Jews.[2]

A further reason why these texts unsettled me might be obvious. I am thinking about the shape of Israeli discourse since 7 October 2023 and its echoes in the western media, in particular in the German media (Israel being where I was born, and Germany being where I currently reside), and disturbing parallels emerge between the corruptive processes Wittgenstein descries and the processes currently taking place.

What I mean, more concretely, is what has been happening to our—to my—language. Of everyday colloquial language Wittgenstein much earlier said that its sentences "are actually, just as they are, logically completely in order" (TLP 5.5563), seeking thereby to warn philosophers against imagining that there is an insurmountable gap between the ideal and the real, and against presuming that their goal, as philosophers, is to reform language. But what room does this idea leave for my realization that the sentences of *my* language are *actually, just as they are, completely out of order*? For they are nothing but local variations on the same theme, casting collective guilt on unborn Palestinian children, finding "reasons" to starve the weak and deny medical treatment to the ill. Calling for what by any other name is genocide.[3]

Wittgenstein later wrote (as Cavell helped me notice) that our everyday language is a homeland, a *Heimat*, which we as philosophers repeatedly exile ourselves from and to which we must seek to return (PI §116; [17] (p. 34)). His own philosophically therapeutic work aimed to bring us back from the flights of theoretical fantasy to the ground of our ordinary forms of life. His assumption still seems to be that the disease can be isolated

to a specific domain of language and given a name, say "philosophy," or "metaphysics". But my worry—a worry I sense in Wittgenstein's postwar letters—is that such diseases contaminate language in all its forms, not just the language of wayward philosophers. That the everyday, the ordinary, is anything but the innocent homeland within which we can find refuge.

For consider again what has become of the sentences of my colloquial language. It has been recruited in order to help conceal the pain and suffering of my fellow humans, and to ensure that the destruction of their homes, their dignity, and their lives can continue to go on barely noticed (cf. [18]). I could easily avoid implicating myself here, by speaking not of *my* but of *their* language. It is much more painful to realize that it is *my* language which has fallen into this abyss. The difficulty is not just admitting to myself that this is happening somewhere, to someone, but realizing that it implicates me, and does so irrevocably.

2. The Ethics of Lectures

Reading these texts here, today, prompts me to address you, the reader, not in the idiom of professional philosophy, but in my own name, as the person I am and from the position I occupy.

This might strike the academic philosopher as unusual. How could I, the person writing this, matter, when it is only the assertions, and the arguments that support them, which should matter? If this is the frame of mind with which you approach my words they will no doubt disappoint you. Yet what I write is not meant to be read as a diary of my merely subjective experiences. Reading personal records in this way would indeed rob them of any ethical importance, but this does not mean that there is no other way to read them, which philosophers may profit from. Indeed it is the attempt to follow in Wittgenstein's own footsteps—to remain as true as I can to the rigorous demand to which his reflections on ethics adhere—which convinces me that it would be a deflection, a moral failure, to pretend, by employing the impersonal academic voice, that these issues are not personal, that they do not involve me. And precisely by speaking of and for myself, I wish to make you see that they involve you, too, that they involve all of us.

The manner in which I plan to do that is by revisiting and rewriting Wittgenstein's moral thought. I wish to put it to the test, but also to use it as a touchstone against which I'll measure the realities with which I am confronted. I hope to find out what can be learned from it, and whether it can help me come to terms with the genocide(s) in which my life has been implicated.

A suitable mode of engagement in ethics, Wittgenstein suggests, is the lecture. And a lecture, for Wittgenstein, does not merely serve to *profess*; it also serves to *confess*. Wittgenstein's 1929 "Lecture on Ethics" is confessional to its core; indeed he described it as a mode of engagement for which the use of the first person is essential.[4] Moreover, the Lecture resists any attempt to theorize and explain what ethics is. Instead, it puts on display Wittgenstein's own, and quite curious, ethical experiences (LOE 8). This is what I aim to do here, too. And so I say: let this be *my* lecture on ethics.

Confessing is not as marginal to the work of the philosopher as one might think, however, and certainly not when it comes to Wittgenstein's work. I will later say more about how Wittgenstein, in the mid-1930s, attempted to come to terms with what he took to be his own sins by confessing them to his friends and relatives. But the idea I propose to consider here is more far reaching; it is the idea that work in philosophy, as such, is confessional. That Wittgenstein's entire work as a philosopher—not only those scattered remarks that seem to bear directly on morality—was an act of confession, a struggle against the constant temptation to deceive oneself.

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Philosophy which takes confession as its ideal seeks, by finding the "liberating word", to defeat one's vanity and pride, and to dismantle one's defenses (BT, 302; CV, 26). By hitting the nail on the head, and by finding the exact description of the problem as it strikes us, it ultimately aims to remove the veils of confusion in which we ourselves shroud our lives.[5] The philosopher's enemy is her own self—her tendency to succumb to what Wittgenstein called "the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language" (PI §109). And thus, even though Wittgenstein may have written relatively little on ethics considered as a special topic, almost everything he wrote addresses this inner ethical struggle. All his investigations employ the first person in an essential, not merely an accidental way.

Thus when I say that a lecture on ethics is a confession, and when I exhort myself to present you with my lecture on ethics, I echo Wittgenstein's assertions that true work in philosophy is "work on oneself", on "the way one sees things", and a struggle against the "resistances of the will", which obscure the things that are too difficult for us to acknowledge (BT 300). He does not mean by this—and neither will I—to point at some mystical teaching, an obscure metaphysical truth that lies deep in the nature of things. "Nothing is hidden" (PI §435), he says, yet precisely those things which lie right before our eyes are those that we fail to acknowledge (PI §129). It is the familiar, the everyday, that we distort and hide from ourselves in our philosophizing, and to which Wittgenstein seeks to bring us back (cf. [17] (p. 32)).

Wittgenstein also insists, against the traditional philosopher, that to make progress with our problems, philosophers need to engage in description, not in explanation or argumentation. He proposes that descriptions may provide us with a surveyable representation of our situation, and thereby uncover the true shape of our problems, rather than attempt to offer solutions to them (PI §§109, 122, 126). This is another idea I wish to put to the test here: to see whether, without attempting to explain things, my descriptions could make a difference.

I already said that I worry Wittgenstein might have been too optimistic in thinking that the difficulty is of a limited scope, that it can be isolated to philosophy, or metaphysics. But another way of looking at it would be to say that we tend to underestimate how pervasive philosophy is, how this mode of thinking affects each of us—philosophers and laypersons alike—and colors every aspect of our lives. And yet, whether he underestimated the scope of the problem or not, Wittgenstein has made an essential contributions to our understanding of the challenge we face. It is not that we lack the solution to our problems, he suggests, but that we do not even grasp the true shape of the problems we purport to solve. Hence his repeated reminders that our problems take the shape of riddles, conjuring tricks, and puzzles.[6]

Like confession, ethical speech may be said to live only in the mouth of the one who speaks it. Wittgenstein insists in the Lecture that his aim is not to convey some lesson, which one could pick up and circulate further.[7] Accordingly, all I can do is find words of my own, seek my own way to describe my problems, and acknowledge my complicity in them. And like confession, my lecture presupposes a hearer in which it puts its trust and from whom it demands trust. So I ask of you, like Wittgenstein did, to understand not my words, but the person who speaks them.[8] I invite you to read my words as *mine*: it is I who am speaking, and I do not hide behind the academic "we", or the "it" or the "one". I do not allow the pretense to objectivity to conceal my pain, my real need to deal with my real problem. But I am speaking from a precarious position, and I hope that in reading my words, you will be reminded of your own precarity. And perhaps this is all one can hope for, in ethics; yet another lesson of Wittgenstein's which I aim to make my own (cf. LOE 5).

Of course some readers may refuse to put their trust in me. Yet such a refusal to hear and to listen risks turning into a refusal of ethics altogether. And if the claim of ethics can

simply be refused, how can one person ever persuade another to recognize it? Wittgenstein has always been troubled by this question (cf. TLP 6.422; LOE 5), and we can read his 1945 drafts as seeking, once again, to address it. I too, given the circumstances I find myself in, am troubled by this question.

3. Settler and Unsettler

Aiming to revisit and rewrite Wittgenstein's ethical thought I will therefore speak of myself, and for myself. But this does not mean that I will not have to philosophize. Since what, if not this, is a philosophical question—Who am I? Indeed, as soon as I ask it, I do not know; and precisely this is the mark of a deep philosophical problem (cf. PI §89 and §436). Who I am, here, now, is precisely the one who seeks to answer the question who I am. I am the one who seeks the liberating word, and does this by reading and rewriting Wittgenstein's words, here and now. And so I must begin my search by situating my discourse in the time and place of its utterance, without completely ignoring the depths of time and the displacements in space that brought me here.

Who am I? Would it help to say that my mother tongue, my *Heimat*, is Hebrew? That I was born in Israel? That I am Jewish? Half Polish, half Czech? A resident of Germany? What it would mean for me to claim any of these identities is part of what I aim to find out by writing out these words. And each of them offers me a different way of implicating myself in my question.

I am not a person of color. I pass for whatever it is that white people around me see themselves as—and isn't this what has always made the Jew seem so uncanny, so abhorrent? This is another difficulty that, as we will see, Wittgenstein grappled with. But like many persons of color who live in European, majority-white countries, what I am often asked is not who I am but: where are you *really* from? What they really seek to establish is my presumed right to occupy a certain space, to settle it.

A few years ago, a German acquaintance asked me a variant of this question. They asked *why* I am here. I attempted not so much to answer but to rebuff their question by listing the names of my four grandparents, all German names (though none of them, incidentally, are my own name). Would they ask my grandfather Nürnberg, why are you here? What about my grandmother Rheinisch? Would they ask grandmother Sachs, or grandfather Friedman? Three of these names are German loconyms, names of places not three hours away from where we were seated, and yet they—my grandparents—were *un*settled. They were unsettled, and yet here I am.

I also recall once meeting a German philosopher, quite adept at modal logic, who, upon realizing where I am "really" from, by inquiring about my grandparents, remarked: how lucky you are that they were saved. And what might be the logical analysis of that, I silently wondered, and noted, with bitter irony, that he was reaching for words that transgress the logical limits of language. To say that I am lucky, or that they were—in reference to an event that robbed them of their families, destroyed their world, and irreversibly unsettled them—struck me as so alien, so completely out of touch. I swallowed my tears.

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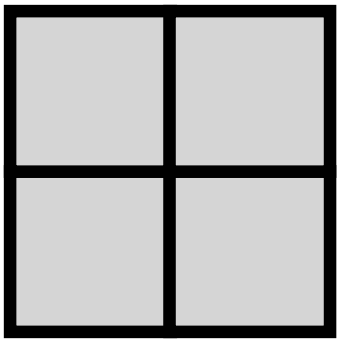
Questions about who I am and where I am *really* from, hence about settling and unsettling, have forced themselves on me, more recently, by moments such as this. A few days after 7 October 2023, I called an Israeli person, so dear to me, and heard from her of the terror she was experiencing. Looking out a window to make sure no one is there. Unbearable fear, for her loved ones and for herself. I could put myself in her shoes. I am in her shoes, for her loved ones are also mine. But then this dear person went on. I cannot

bear it, she says. I do not know how this feeling can be made to go away. I want *them* to make it go away. I do not care how *they*'ll make it go away. It has to stop.

This phone call did not last much longer. And the next time I met her, I was not able to look in her eyes when I recalled her words. A gulf opened up between us. I realized I no longer understood her, could no longer understand her, might never be able to understand her again. How can I make sense of this—of the possibility of her shutting her eyes, allowing her own pain to shut out the pain of others?

Wittgenstein also looked out of a window once (PI §420). He too saw, through window-panes divided by a cross-shaped figure, children playing in the yard. Perhaps he felt simple joy in watching them play, their senseless repetition of some newly acquired motor-skill. He turned his eyes, then looked again. But then something *unheimlich*—uncanny—unsettling happened. Now, separating the panes, he could not but see a swastika. Can you see it?



Nothing changed. Yet everything was different. And could he still feel joy at seeing the children playing in the yard?

Wittgenstein appeals to the experience of the shifting aspect of what is seen in the window in order to shed light on the *unheimlich* feeling he got when he attempted to see the playing children through the eyes of the skeptic, namely, as mere automata. It is not because he himself is a skeptic that Wittgenstein spends time exploring this experience, but because, despite the philosophical urge to *argue* against the validity of skepticism, he did not wish to deflect from acknowledging the real, human tendency that lies at its source. What he uncovers, by juxtaposing the two phenomena—skepticism and inhumanity—is that both reflect the ability of human beings to shift their way of seeing other humans, to blind themselves to the humanity of others.[9]

Wittgenstein does tell us that skepticism can sometimes be unsettled, that its unsettling effect can sometimes be undone. Namely, he suggests that it can be unsettled by the vision of children playing, or of someone being harmed. This is how he challenges the skeptic in himself: "Just try—in a real case—to doubt someone else's fear or pain!" (PI §303). And just before he sees the swastika in the windowpanes, he writes:

> PI §420. . . . But just try to hang on to this idea in the midst of your ordinary intercourse with others—in the street, say! Say to yourself, for example: "The children over there are mere automata; all their liveliness is mere automatism." And you will either find these words becoming quite empty; or you will produce in yourself some kind of uncanny [*unheimlich*] feeling, or something of the sort.

But reading this, now, I cannot help but think: if children can unsettle the skeptic, why are we—why are they—not unsettled by the children of Gaza?

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My motivation for translating '*unheimlich*' as 'unsettling' is twofold. I seek, firstly, to draw attention to the relevance of this phenomenon to *ethical* thought. Time and again, in

the past three years, I have been confronted with such unsettling moments. An alien image invades my field of vision. It becomes superimposed over the ordinary things I see, over the things I took to be ordinary. And then they are ordinary no more. Then I cannot but feel an abyss opening up beneath my feet. What do these experiences of the unsettling seek to tell me? What can they do to me, or urge me to do?[10]

The translation of '*unheimlich*' as 'unsettling' is meant, secondly, to reveal its *political* significance, and in particular, its potential relevance to the Israeli–Palestinian context. It has been suggested to me, by Ido Nahari, that the political significance of the *unheimlich* for us, as Israelis, can be, as Israelis, can be brought out by asking: what could be more unsettling than the settlements? I might understand the question differently from him, but for me, too, the settlements are unsettling, and in more than one way.

Consider this: in early 2024 together with *Israelis for Peace*, a group of Israelis based in Berlin, I was involved in organizing a public event in which we sought to bring the German public to see that solidarity with Jews and Israelis need not take the form of supporting the atrocious policies of the Israeli government. The invitation to our event was derided by some more radically leftist commentators; one of them dismissed and debunked our group by calling us "settlers for peace". This and similar remarks, made in the context of the debates unleashed by 7.10, sought to unsettle me, by demanding that I see myself as a settler. And while initially I felt resistance to even consider what it would mean to efface all those distinctions that constitute my identity as that of a non-settler, I ultimately allowed the unsettling doubts to creep in, and proceeded to examine what happens when I do not attempt to silence them by means of arguments, by means of facts, by means of words. So I began to ask: Am I still, living now in a different country, and have I always been a settler? My childhood, quite ordinary, with its equal measures of boredom and idyll—was all this conditioned on, or even conducive of, the unseen pain of others? Can I truly separate myself from the violence committed by my ancestors, or their relatives, and from the violence committed still, by a state I no longer live in—from the violence of unsettling? Can I draw a clear line between myself, and those who do identify as settlers, and who keep blurring the lines that used to define limits of our language, the borders of our state, and the reach of its laws? Aren't the limits of *my* language, and hence the limits of my world, drawn quite differently from the limits of theirs?

I recall other unsettling doubts that arose much earlier, and much closer to home. As a child, I used to design elaborate contraptions for picking prickly pears without allowing their almost invisible thorns to penetrate my soft skin. All in vain, of course. Was there actually something sinister about these moments of innocence? Well, it was only much later in life, by learning some botany and some political economy, that I realized that prickly pears were introduced to our areas from the Americas, not long before the 20th century; that their resistance to wind, as well as their thorns, made them ideal for marking the borders of farming plots; and that they never send their seeds far off, but propagate locally, so that wherever they are found today, it is likely that they were placed there by those local farmers whose claim on this land is no longer recognized. Realizing this was unsettling, for it revealed what lurked beneath the settled, the ordinary, the everyday; another unsettled settlement that preceded mine, and that cries out, from the depths of oblivion, to be acknowledged.

I do not claim to *know* where these unsettling doubts lead. I do not wish to draw any conclusions from them yet, but to offer them as material for philosophical treatment. I note only that once these doubts emerged, they could not be silenced by the words of my fellow countrymen: "the unsettled who returns cannot really be a settler", and "what if this has actually been the least of two evils?", and "besides, what do you suggest?"

These rationalizations and deflections may have a momentary effect, making the gnawing, unsettling feeling of *un-homeliness* subside. But it is bound to return.

I recall another dear Israeli person. A hero of mine, a model of kindness, and of what the world of the happy person might look like. And then, late on the phone one night, in November 2023, they tell me it is all still so unclear. It is not yet time for *us* to speak. *We* do not know, we do not *really* know, if what *they* (the politicians, the military officials, the war-mongers) say is true or not. If it isn't, that would change things entirely. But we do not know. And who are we to say?

I felt I lost them, too. Not because they actively did anything to hurt anyone. Nor because I could look and see evil in them—my love for them prevents me, blinds me to this possibility. But once I noticed how their skepticism serves to shield them from the need to take responsibility, I could not but think of what happens to those standing at the receiving end of evasion, avoidance, and deflection [21] (p. 109). They are made invisible, stripped of their humanity, and worse.

When, many months later, I spoke to this friend again, my feeling was one of meeting a person frozen in time. Then I saw: "The facts all belong only to the task and not to its solution" (TLP 6.4321), that is, I saw that we have both been looking at the same range of facts, at all the facts, yet their understanding of the problem was so different from mine, that they were seeing crosses in the windowpanes, while I was terrified, for I couldn't get them to see the swastika.

4. Where Was Wittgenstein *Really* From?

At the opening I quoted some excerpts from Wittgenstein's 1945 drafts, and I will soon quote a few more. But since these texts are drafts for *letters*, meant to be sent out and made public, we can and should look at them as political speech acts. And in politics what act is performed depends essentially on who speaks, and to whom. So who is the author of these letters? We know Wittgenstein had a contorted relationship to his ethnic, religious and national identities, which underwent several radical transformations throughout his life. Some of his earliest recorded remarks on the topic are simply inexcusable. In the personal notebooks he kept during World War I he wrote, for example:

> So I feel today, more than ever, the terrible sadness of our—the German race's—position!! That we cannot prevail over England strikes me as good as certain: the English—the best race in the world—cannot lose! We, however, can lose & will lose, if not this year, then the next! The thought that our race will be defeated depresses me terribly because I am German through & through! (PN 71)

One thing which is unsettling here is the extravagant use of exclamation marks, which reminds me of more recent jingoistic texts. But let me focus on the last claim—Wittgenstein's identification as German through and through. This was 1914: he had left Cambridge to join the Austrian military and insisted on being sent to the front as a simple artillery soldier (rather than enlist as an officer, or as an engineer). He seems to have been attracted to the idea of sacrificing himself for the sake of a putative greater cause—the nation—even though, as he admits, he was not under the impression that it will prevail. The editor of his *Private Notebooks*, Marjorie Perloff, proposes to excuse the young Wittgenstein's use of the term "race" as something which was common at the time, used to express nationalist sentiment but not necessarily to express what we now consider to be a racist thought (PN 71n). But why should we tolerate it, even if it is true that the term as it is used here does not denote a biological notion? It might have been near-impossible for anyone living in that period to escape this rhetoric, but it was an evil nonetheless, and one which led to the death of millions.

We also know that as a young man Wittgenstein deflected from acknowledging his Jewish ancestry, from recognizing it as part of his answer to the question "who am I?". The evidence for this is indirect: in the 1930s he made personal confessions to many of his acquaintances, admitting among his gravest sins the fact that earlier in life he let people believe, or avoided correcting them if they did, that he stems from the German nobility of Sayn-Wittgenstein, rather than the Jewish families of his converted grandparents [23] (p. 369); [24] (p. 35).

Was Wittgenstein ever asked where he was *really* from? Did he call on his family's adopted loconym, in order to provide the answer? I can only speculate in what contexts he failed to mention that the name Wittgenstein was first taken up by his great-grandfather, Moses Meier, in compliance with the Napoleonic decree that all Jews assume an inheritable name. It is not clear whether Wittgenstein also knew the story according to which the nobleman, upon his return to his lands, took the unauthorized assumption of his name as an affront, and flogged Meier [25] (p. 258).

These unsettling histories draw my attention to the great ethical significance that may be carried by a name, and to how acts of naming may implicate one in deception and false pretense, but also serve as occasions for sincerity and honesty. They prompt me to ask whether my own name similarly implicates me, whether I have also failed to take up the duty (if it is one) to say where I am *really* from—to identify as a descendent of Jews, or as an Israeli, as an unsettled, and maybe even as a settler. Doesn't my Hebrew name, which does not coincide with any of the original names of my unsettled grandparents, serve to conceal my ancestry? Indeed wasn't the Israeli practice of Hebraicizing names (in which my grandparents partook) meant to promote the fiction of autochthony, of one's *not* being an unsettled, and of one's *not* being a settler? Upon reflection, I also realize that in revealing the names of my unsettled grandparents to the German acquaintance who asked me where I am *really* from, I used those names in order to unsettle *them*, in order to get them to see what their question *really* implies.

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In the 1930s there are clear signs that Wittgenstein's attitude had radically changed, and that he became much more critical of nationalism. In 1934, in his conversations with Pierro Sraffa, Wittgenstein critiques the idea that a nation has an unalterable "physiognomy" that determines its historical and political fate: "The fallacy roughly speaking is to think that if the unexpected things happened the people would have no face, no physiognomy" (WC 226)—where the "unexpected things" he imagines include the transformation of a belligerent, racist nation into a peaceful and pluralistic one.

The picture of people without a face is an uncanny one, indeed. And this brings out how deeply rooted the opposite picture is in the way people tended to think (and apparently still do) about each other as members of national groups: that without their national identity, they would have no identity at all. However, to speak of such a picture as a fallacy (as Wittgenstein does here, though only "roughly speaking") is to distort the shape of the problem. For clearly it is not by logical arguments that such pictures become entrenched, nor by refutations that they can be dislodged. A much more radical form of therapy would be needed to free us—all of us, me included, and I suspect you too—from the deeper, more hidden forms of our attachment to such pictures (an issue I return to below).

In a letter Wittgenstein wrote to his American student, Norman Malcolm, in 1944, he describes how disturbed he was by a casual remark Malcolm made six years earlier—so disturbed, in fact, that Wittgenstein could not let go of it, all those years, until finally he found an opportunity to address it:

> Whenever I thought of you I couldn't help thinking of a particular incident which seemed to me very important. . . . you made a remark about 'national character' that shocked me by its primitiveness. I then thought: what is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., & if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life, if it does not make you more conscientious than any . . . journalist in the use of the DANGEROUS phrases such people use for their own ends. (MAM 93)

For six years Wittgenstein held this grudge. Clearly at this point in time, in 1944, he was no longer willing to tolerate the kind of nationalistic thinking that he himself, many years prior, also indulged in.

Wittgenstein's later, more critical approach to the essentializing idea of the nation is visible in both drafts of the 1945 letters. In the first one, he is distressed by the representation of "the German people. . . as one pack of wolves", where the emphasis, I take it, is on "one". But it would not be a bad idea to pause and notice the animal metaphor Wittgenstein alludes to, and to consider the role that such metaphors play in genocidal speech, both in this case and in others (cf. [26]). In the second letter, the critique of nationalism is thematized in the context of Wittgenstein's response to an opponent who argues that the horrors committed by the Nazis were in some way foretold in the putative essence of the German nation, and that this somehow justifies a genocidal retaliation, by means of starvation. Wittgenstein counters: "what they [the horrors] demonstrate is not the depravity of the German nation in particular but rather what can happen in a short time in a country in which the worst elements, for whatever reason, rise to the top". In saying that this *can* happen in any country, including one's own, Wittgenstein clearly seeks to *unsettle* his readers; he wishes to tell the British that nationalistic ways of thinking have led them to engage in moralizing, in casting the first stone, and that such nationalistic thinking blinds them to harms for which they themselves might be responsible.[11]

National identity was not just a theoretical question for Wittgenstein, but also a practical problem that affected his own life. We can see this in a letter to his friend Gilbert Pattison which he wrote in 1938, upon the annexation of Austria:

> . . .Now it is about myself that I really want to write. . . .I am placed in a queer position. As you know I am automatically becoming a German citizen, i.e., a German Jew. Now I must say the very thought of becoming a German citizen is appalling to me, even apart from the degrading position etc. [of the Jew], but this latter I would share with my relatives & could, I think, bring myself to bear. Though I don't know whether it would not continuously be preying on my mind. . . . Therefore now I have been seriously considering the idea of acquiring British citizenship. (WC 271)

It is not just that Wittgenstein, in 1938, is no longer "a German through and through". Writing "about myself," he says he is appalled by the possibility of becoming a German citizen. He also feels alienated, though less strongly, from the Jewish identity that will be foisted on him by the racist laws of the Nazis. Yet he later also adds that even if he were given a British passport, he cannot imagine himself becoming more than a "sham-Englishman".[12] The choice of this term is unfortunate, indeed, for it seems to imply that "Englishman" denotes a physiognomy that one can only inherit, but never adopt. I hope Wittgenstein eventually came to see that he should have avoided it; but perhaps he only meant to speak of himself, of his own inability to assimilate. Be that as it may, at this point in time Wittgenstein has been exiled from his *Heimat* as well as from his religious community, and the two substitutes he is being offered—becoming British, becoming

a German-Jew—cannot play the identity-constituting role that political and communal belonging normally does. He has become unsettled.

5. The Speech Act of Unsettling

It is from this position, then, the position of the unsettled, that Wittgenstein seeks to voice his protest, in 1945. Let us read the first draft again, this time quoting it in full:

> Sir, it is ridiculous to see all the discussion going on about the harmfulness of the gangster films to the young while the minds of both adults & children are being systematically poisoned by the worst kind of Vansittart propaganda. . . The gloating over dead 'Huns', over the old German cities razed to the ground, over German civilians walking among the ruins of their towns? Nobody doubts the unspeakable horrors of the Nazi Regime which are perhaps comparable only to . . . When they were in full swing long before the war had started & even after it had started we heard very little about them . . . Now that the enemy is completely finished . . . all the well known tricks of the camera & the by far nastier ones of the commentators are set in motion to represent the German people to the unthinking cinema goer as one pack of wolves. The commentators are worthy pupils of Dr. Goebbels, of the worst kind of Germans. We are not writing this letter in what would be a crazy expectation to open the eyes of the blind, but to direct the attention of the seeing to a horrid evil, the lying propaganda, the germ of Nazism itself. (MS151 46–47)

Vansittart, the politician Wittgenstein targets, has an -ism to his name. For he was the first to popularize the notion, which might have had a short life in Britain but certainly lives on elsewhere, according to which there is no difference between being German and being Nazi, since aggressive expansionism belongs to the very essence of Germanhood—rendering Vansittartt the first modern "antideutscher".[13]

Indeed, Vansittartism may still be found in our own times, and on all sides. Of course there is a specific name for what Vansittartism amounts to when such an attitude is directed against Jews.[14] But Vansittartism can also be seen in the way some Israelis speak of Palestinians, particularly of Gazans. And it can also be found among those, in Palestine and worldwide, who portray Israelis as *inherently* aggressively expansionist—inherently unsettling settlers. As if the physiognomy of my people is unalterable; as if without it, they—I—would have no face at all. And yet another painful truth is that many Jews, and many Israelis, do indeed believe that without the privileges of an apartheid ethnostate they would become faceless. This unsettling picture continues to hold them—and us—captive.[15]

In the 1945 letter, Wittgenstein, the unsettled, wishes to tell the British that there is a great evil going on, yet they are either blind to it, or they find ways to deflect from it. He admits that his letter will not help the blind. Yet he has hope for those who have eyes. He wants to shift their attention—to get them to see the swastika in the windowpanes. He does not seem completely convinced, though, that mere words would be enough. For he knows how deeply warped the British mind is, having been misshapen by the rhetorics and theatrics of jingoistic nationalism. Their colloquial language is *not* in perfect logical order just as it is.

Did Wittgenstein recognize this as the moment in which the philosopher must return to the cave, and seek to turn his countrymen's heads towards the fire and the puppets and the entire machinery of illusion-making that they have been subjected to? Let us suppose that he did. Was he, then, under the impression that a mere "critique of language," by means of logical analysis, would suffice (cf. TLP 4.003)? And can I pretend that linguistic analysis would be enough to save *us*, today? How much of a difference would it make if we introduced separate signs for each of the senses one can attach to the words that have

become so contested: "free Palestine"? If we could clearly draw such distinctions, would everyone—all Israelis, Jews, all Germans, and everyone else, finally join the chant? What about words like "context", "explanation", "justification" and "excuse"? Of course we need an analysis of these words, since their ambiguities allow them to be misused (cf. [28]). And while clarification and disambiguation may be of some help, they fail to address the deeper sources of the disagreements. What is needed, ultimately, is not to treat these ambiguous expressions themselves, but the forces within each of us from which our attraction to the ambiguities arises. Indeed the caricature of Wittgenstein's philosophy, as if it only seeks to address words rather than persons, is one I have never found convincing. No doubt, a philosopher's work is done by means of words; but so does the work of the politician and of the psychoanalyst.

Wittgenstein writes that his aim, in his letter, is to redirect "the attention of the seeing"; he does not aim to inform, but to transform his readers (namely, by unsettling them). Admittedly, he then goes on to deny that he indulges in the "crazy expectation to open the eyes of the blind". But why should this expectation be called crazy? Wittgenstein seems to think of the deeper resistances that would prevent some of his readers from performing the shift in aspect that other readers may be brought to undergo. Of similar resistances he elsewhere speaks in terms of mythologies that seduce us and in terms of pictures that hold us captive (BT 317; PI §115), and throughout his work he develops various means of addressing our attraction to them. Such treatments go well beyond what can be done by means of a single letter, especially one authored by an unsettled, a foreigner. So perhaps Wittgenstein did not mean that it is crazy, *tout court*, to expect to open the eyes of the (metaphorically) blind; for it is precisely this kind of hope that motivates him elsewhere, and which motivates me, too.

***

For all we know Wittgenstein never sent or published his letters. But there is another letter he did send to a fellow Austrian turned British citizen, Victor Gollancz, in September 1945. Gollancz was a successful publisher and an outspoken critic of Vansittartist propaganda. He argued that the horrors of the camps cannot be treated as an argument against *the Germans* as such, since many of those imprisoned in the camps were Germans themselves [29] (p. 8). What he proposed, in effect, was that a complete analysis of the proposition "all Germans are guilty" would reveal it to be logically false. For it would show it to mean something like "all Germans, some of whom are the victims, are, one and all, guilty," which is patently absurd.[16] Gollancz does not thereby seek to *argue* for the claim that atrocities committed by members of one group do not justify reciprocating by committing atrocities against the entirety of that group. For that claim should be obvious. His aim, rather, is to reshape what his interlocutors imagine when they speak of some human collective as *one group*—a mode of speaking which, Gollancz must have realized, blinds his interlocutors.

Certain speech acts which began to circulate in June 2025 strike me as similar in their aims. I am thinking of the pictures of Gazan men, standing in rubble, holding up photographs of dead Israeli children [30]. What speech act is performed by holding up such photographs clearly depends both on who performs them and on who they address. When I myself stood, with other Israelis in Tel-Aviv and in Berlin, holding up pictures of dead Palestinian children, reading their names out loud, some passersby dismissed this as a form of moral whitewashing. But it was not them we were addressing anyway. We were trying to address those who can see but whose eyes have been turned away, and we were trying, like Gollancz and like Wittgenstein, to unsettle them, and to redirect their attention to those whose faces they refuse to see, and whose names they would rather not hear.

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Wittgenstein's letter to Gollancz is interesting for another reason, namely that it thematizes Wittgenstein's own difficulty in finding his own voice, and in finding a way to engage in public writing, from his exiled, unsettled position. He might have thought that by entering into conversation with a public figure like Gollancz he would be able to have an impact, albeit an indirect one, on the British public. But while in the letter itself Wittgenstein first praises Gollancz for his stance towards the anti-German propaganda, he then goes on to attack him for diluting the power of his critique, namely by attempting to give it a general theoretical justification, and to ground it in abstract ethical principles:

> I am deeply in sympathy with your severe criticism (and it cannot be too severe) of the cruelty, meanness and vulgarity of the daily press and of the BBC. . . .
>
> I know it is often difficult to refrain from raising . . .side-issues. . . .
>
> If you want to point out a foul scandal and to tell people, 'Remove it, it stinks!', then, for Heaven's sake, don't add remarks about the lovely smell of roses. Such remarks, even if they are true, immediately put your writing on a wrong plane, on the plane of talk and inaction.
>
> If you really want people to remove the dirt, don't talk to them about the philosophical issues of the value of life and happiness. This, if it does anything, will start academic chat.
>
> . . .—If you ask me why, instead of criticising you, I don't write articles myself, I should answer that I lack the knowledge, the facility of expression and the time necessary for any decent and effective journalism. In fact, writing this letter of criticism to a man of your views and of your ability is the nearest approach to what is denied me, i.e., to writing a good article myself. [31] (pp. 406–407).

What Wittgenstein warns Gollancz against is the philosophical temptation to ground moral criticism in an overarching theory of ethical value. This, Wittgenstein suggests, would be to engage in mere "academic chat." And the issue he raises here goes deeper than it might seem.

"Chatter" is one of the terms Wittgenstein uses to signal the ethical force of his critique of language, where "nonsense" is its morally neutral counterpart. And empty chatter is precisely what, in the *Tractatus*, he sought to replace with silence (TLP 7).[17] Yet what Wittgenstein criticizes, in targeting chatter, is not so much the expressions that make it up, but the false appearance these expressions create of serving some purpose which in fact they cannot serve; those who produce chatter suffer from a form of self-deception. Wittgenstein takes this to be characteristic of philosophers who, for example, treat certain sentences as guaranteeing that all other sentences are justified, while ignoring that these sentences themselves cannot be justified (TLP 6.371–6.372; LOE 4). He compares this philosophical form of self-deception to the use of architectural ornaments, such as sham-corbels, which bear no load and which only serve to silence our psychological anxieties (VW 69–77; PI §217).

In Gollancz's case, Wittgenstein thinks that the chatter of trying to ground his critique in a theory of "the value of life and happiness" undermines the critique itself, since it places it "on the plane of talk and inaction" and thereby robs it of its true ethical force. To this self-defeating tendency in ethics Wittgenstein has sought, in his own work, to offer an alternative: a mode of ethical engagement that is decisively anti-theoretical (cf. WVC 117: "*For me* a theory is without value. A theory gives me nothing"). The way ethical speech works is not (at least not always) by means of argument, or theory. In order to redirect people's attention (maybe even open the eyes of the blind), ethical speech requires no theoretical justification. Nor does it always depend on supplying the interlocutors with new information, or new knowledge. To bring about a transformation in their fundamental

understanding of their situation, and to get them to abandon their refusal of ethics, it may suffice to address the interlocutors themselves and to remind them of things they already know. For instance by presenting them with a picture of children playing.

The methods and therapies Wittgenstein develops in his reflections on philosophical problems (cf. PI §144, §127, §129) as well as in his reflections on ethical and political problems, are techniques designed for shifting the interlocutors' attention and transforming their vision. Their aim is to get the interlocutor to give up their settled ways of construing the facts, since these leave them unable to solve what they take to be their problems. Instead, these methods seek to lead the interlocutors to adopt new ways of construing the facts, which might help them circumvent the problems altogether. These techniques work, precisely, insofar as they unsettle.

6. Ethics Without Knowledge

As I approach my conclusion I wonder whether I managed to adhere to the austerity of Wittgenstein's methods. I looked at how Wittgenstein examines an analogy between two distinct historical situations (Nazi Germany and Post-War Britain), and I then extended this analogy to further historical situations (Israel, Palestine, and the global reactions to the conflict). By examining the effects of these analogies on myself, I have come to understand that the drawing of such analogies is among the techniques of ethics, whose aim is to unsettle. For unsettling analogies may help us notice hidden aspects of our situation, and they can thereby help change our ways of seeing it.[18]

I also sought to understand from what position Wittgenstein was speaking in his letters. It was neither from the position of an Austrian or a German, nor from the position of someone who proposes to forgive the German perpetrators, that he wrote on behalf of the defeated. He did this, rather, from the position of someone who has been unsettled, and cares deeply for the people of the country which gave him refuge. And he wrote it as someone who, from his own precarious position, and in light of his own personal involvement, seeks to morally criticize, but not to moralize. If my own criticism of Israel's policies, or of Germany's blind support for them, seems anodyne to the hardened radical leftist, perhaps this is because I chose a similar path.

One of the unsettling lessons of Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics" is that we cannot meaningfully *speak* of the absolutely right thing to do, from which it follows that we cannot know it either. It might help those who engage in contemporary political debates to remember these. For just as there is no such thing as knowing *the absolutely right way* to Granchester (LOE 6), there is no such thing as knowing the absolutely right way to Palestine—or to Israel. But this need not mean that without such knowledge, we must rest content with inaction. Wittgenstein did try to write his letters; he did try to say something of great ethical importance, and to effect real change by means of his words. He tried to act, without pretending to command absolute knowledge. For once he has seen the swastika framing the window that British propaganda opened for its audience, he simply could not remain silent. And even though coming to see the ethical significance of a situation in a new way may not count as *knowledge*, it does make its own kind of claim on us, and it is one which we cannot refuse.

I do remember that, for all we know, Wittgenstein never published the letters. But I have. And not just by citing Wittgenstein's words, but by finding words of my own, in which his words may resound.[19]

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Notes

1 The following abbreviations are used to refer to texts by Wittgenstein:

BT	*Big Typescript*	[1]
CV	*Culture and Value*	[2]
CPE	Engelmann, P. *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein. With a Memoir*	[3]
LOE	A Lecture on Ethics	[4]
MAM	Malcolm, N. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*	[5]
MS151	*Wittgenstein Source: Bergen Nachlass Edition (WS-BNE), MS-151*	[6]
NB	*Notebooks, 1914–1916*	[7]
PI	*Philosophical Investigations*	[8]
PPF	*Philosophy of Psychology: A Fragment*	[9]
PN	*Private Notebooks, 1914–1916*	[10]
TLP	*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*	[11]
VW	*The Voices of Wittgenstein: The Vienna Circle*	[12]
VS	Venturinha & Smith, Wittgenstein on British Anti-Nazi Propaganda	[13]
WC	*Wittgenstein in Cambridge: Letters and Documents 1911–1951*	[14]
WVC	Waismann, F. *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*	[15]

2 This text was recently discovered in G.H. von Wright's estate and published by Venturinha and Smith (VS 207-8).

3 I began writing this paper in June 2025, as the evidence for widespread and man-caused famine in Gaza was mounting. I believe there is no need to engage here in debate over the question whether the destruction of Gaza by the Israeli military and the prevention of humanitarian aid to its residents meet the legal definition of genocide, since it is unsettling enough that the kind of processes which can easily lead to genocide did in fact take place. Of relevance here is the evidence for genocidal intent which was submitted in the context of the case brought to the International Court of Justice by South Africa in December 2023. See [16], especially §§101–107.

4 I am indebted to Nimrod Matan for discussion of Wittgenstein's idea that ethics essentially involves speaking in the first person. And see WVC 116: "At the end of my lecture on ethics I spoke in the first person: I think that this is something very essential. Here there is nothing to be stated any more; all I can do is to step forth as an individual and speak in the first person".

5 BT 303: "One of the most important tasks is to express all false thought processes so true to character that the reader says, 'Yes, that's exactly the way I meant it'. To make a tracing of the physiognomy of every error."

6 See, e.g., TLP 6.5; BT 311, 364, 496; PI §308; PPF §251. I discuss this in more detail in [19].

7 Cf. LOE 8: "And there, in my case, it always happens that the idea of one particular experience presents itself to me which therefore is, in a sense, my experience *par excellence* . . . (As I have said before, this is an entirely personal matter and others would find other examples more striking)."

8 Diamond clarifies the importance of the distinction between understanding Wittgenstein's propositions and understanding Wittgenstein, and reads the *Tractatus* as an attempt to understand not the philosopher's propositions, but "the person who is in the grip of the illusion" (namely the illusion that their philosophical propositions make sense), in [20] (pp. 150 & 160). And cf. TLP 6.54: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical".

9 On the possibility of shifting the aspect under which we see things, and on the possibility of being blind with respect to aspects see PPF §§111 ff., and esp. §232. Cavell connects this blindness to the dehumanizing gaze of the slaveowner [21] (pp. 378–380). Blindness is also at issue in Wittgenstein's 1945 letter drafts, which I return to below.

10 Though she does not frame her topic as bearing on the *Unheimlich*, Diamond investigates the closely related ethical experience of being "shouldered out" into confronting "the difficulty of reality" in [22].

11 On the distinction between the moralist and the moralizer and on its relevance to Wittgenstein's philosophical method, see Cavell's discussion [21] (p. 175 and pp. 286–326).

12 Ibid. This is an expression Wittgenstein uses two other times in 1938: In a letter To P. Sraffa (WC 267), and in a letter to J. M. Keynes (WC 273).

[13] "Antideutsch" is a German term that surfaced in the late 1960s among leftwing groups opposed to German militarism. It later came to be associated with the commitment to unconditional solidarity with the state of Israel, which is now widespread among German politicians of all stripes.

[14] This is Wittgenstein's point when, in the other draft, he writes that Vansittart fosters "the very attitude of the Nazis only this time directed towards the German nation not towards the Jews."

[15] For a historical analysis which avoids essentializing the contingencies that led Israel to this point, see Bartov [27].

[16] The thorny problem of the analysis of general propositions has plagued Wittgenstein's early logical theory (cf. NB 64); he might have noticed that Gollancz identifies a related problem in the nationalistic thinking of their contemporaries.

[17] Wittgenstein's attack on chatter can be seen in the motto of TLP, as well as in Letter to Ficker, 1919 (CPE 143); Letter to Engelmann, 16.1.1918 (CPE 11); LOE 4, WVC 69 and BT 258.

[18] There is much debate over the permissibility of drawing historical analogies, which ramifies into debates over the proper application of the term "genocide". But while the analogies serve Wittgenstein (and me) to make clear the urgency of a moral appeal, they do not (or anyway they should not be taken to) detract from the severity of the atrocities to which one compares the present one.

[19] For their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper I would like to thank Abigail Akavia, Logi Gunnarsson, Nimrod Matan, Michael Kremer, Jonathan Gombin, Sasha Blickhan, Gino Margani, and Cora Diamond, as well as the participants in the conference "The Lecture on Ethics Revisited", held at the University of Potsdam in June 2025.

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