When Language Goes on Holiday: Philosophy and Anti-philosophy in Marx and Wittgenstein

“For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday.” — Wittgenstein

Karl Marx dedicated his life to the cause of revolutionary socialism, while Ludwig Wittgenstein generally stayed away from politics. Marx had a background in Hegelian philosophy, while Wittgenstein developed as a philosopher in a completely different manner, through his encounter with mathematical logic. These thinkers, with widely divergent styles and backgrounds, nonetheless came to express similar thoughts on the problematic nature of traditional philosophical goals and methods. After outlining some reasons for describing these thinkers as ‘anti-philosophers,’ I will explore Marx and Wittgenstein’s overlapping views by focusing on the notion of philosophical language as ordinary language gone ‘on holiday,’ looking briefly, in turn, at the nature of such philosophical language, its inherent difficulties, and its anti-philosophical dissolution.

Anti-philosophy?

Wittgenstein is often regarded as an anti-philosopher in virtue of his enduring belief, expressed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, that “most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical.” There was clearly something about traditional philosophy that Wittgenstein completely rejected. While Wittgenstein’s literary output is generally termed philosophical, and Wittgenstein certainly described it in this manner, we must recognize how Wittgenstein greatly restricts the purview of philosophical inquiry. He suggested that the subject he was dealing with is “one of the heirs of the subject that used to be called ‘philosophy.’” Generally, he saw himself as engaged in a sort of dissolution of philosophical questions or problems, the goal of which would be achieved when readers no longer see the idle questions which vex them as genuine problems at all.

While Marx is generally recognized as having turned his back on philosophical studies, the specific anti-philosophical line of thought that runs through his criticisms of Hegelianism is often ignored. In spite of Marx’s harsh words for the metaphysical theorizing that he identified with philosophy in the 1840s, most Marxists have historically sought to erect some sort of philosophical edifice on Marx’s ‘materialist’ foundations. Even supposed anti-Hegelians who have written about Marx’s early works, such as Louis Althusser, have believed that Marx was establishing some sort of new metaphysics (‘dialectical materialism’), just as he was
denouncing the old. Even before what Althusser considered the decisive ‘rupture’ with his early theory—*The German Ideology*, written in 1846—Marx had developed the basic contours of his anti-philosophical stance. In *The German Ideology* itself, Marx claimed that the “traditionally occurring philosophical expressions” in some of his earlier works had led certain philosophers to misunderstand his “real trend of thought,” and to imagine that he was merely “giving a new turn to their worn-out theoretical garment.”

The influence of Feuerbach on the young Marx was decisive. Even though he was to criticize Feuerbach in *The German Ideology* as still stuck within the confines of the Hegelian system, Marx learned much from Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel. Marx implicitly agreed with Feuerbach’s claim that “the culmination of modern philosophy is the Hegelian philosophy.” Not without justification, Marx saw Hegel as the most systematic representative of the philosophical desire to reveal truths hidden from practical-scientific view. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, perhaps the most celebrated of Marx’s early works, Marx writes that Feuerbach has “shown that philosophy is nothing more than religion brought into thought and developed in thought, and that it is equally to be condemned as another form and mode of existence of the estrangement of man’s nature.” Neither Feuerbach nor Marx attempted to secularize Hegel: both took quite seriously the parallels that Hegel drew between philosophy and religion. “Philosophy is not worldly wisdom but cognition of the nonworldly,” claimed Hegel. Accordingly, Marx saw philosophy as founded on a mystification of the social and the worldly. He thus charged his former colleagues, the Young Hegelians, with never having left “the realm of philosophy,” and claimed of the milieu: “Not only in its answers, even in its questions there was a mystification.”

**Philosophy and its Truths**

Wittgenstein saw his philosophical task not as the discovery of philosophical truths, but rather as the clearing away of confusion. Traditionally, philosophical claims have been seen as super-empirical, revealing the hidden structure of our language or our world. By contrast, Wittgenstein demotes philosophy to a sort of organization of thought, a clearing away of cobwebs. According to Wittgenstein, unlike empirical problems, philosophical problems can be solved “by looking into the workings of our language... in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by reporting new experience, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language.”

Our seemingly profound philosophical claims can be deflated if we come to recognize our philosophical impulse to misunderstand the workings of our language. We can then “pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.” In other words, we recognize an absence of meaning or sense in what we had previously seen as profound claims. It is not that what we say when doing philosophy is *inherently* nonsense, but rather that our language is not doing the work we often think it is doing. Like logical propositions, philosophic claims seem to be super-empirical, and we can seemingly recognize their truth through private reflection. But it is precisely this divorce of philosophic language from its social uses that makes it “disguised nonsense,” according to Wittgenstein.
We become most confused about our language when we are inattentive to the things we actually do with language. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes that such confusions “arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work.” The metaphor of the idling engine is similar to Wittgenstein’s metaphor of language going “on holiday” insofar as they both have to do with the absence of work. While it might seem to a philosopher that keeping language idle or abstracting from its everyday usage allows for a scientific sort of investigation that will reveal deeper truths about meaning, the meanings that words have in the flow of social life are in fact the only meanings possible. Thus, the philosophers chase after chimeras. Wittgenstein addresses this issue in *The Blue Book*: “Philosophers very often talk about investigating, analyzing, the meaning of words. But let’s not forget that a word hasn’t got a meaning given to it, as it were, by a power independent of us, so that there could be a kind of scientific investigation into what the word really means. A word has the meaning someone has given to it.” In this section of the book, Wittgenstein refers to Socrates’ question “What is knowledge?” as an example of this sort of philosophic inquiry. Wittgenstein considers the sort of answer that is desired to be part of the mystification of the question: “When Socrates asks the question, ‘what is knowledge?’ he does not even regard it as a preliminary answer to enumerate cases of knowledge.” To take another classical example, “What is justice?” is often presented as a question on which some sort of progress is possible, as one might make progress in some non-philosophic discipline. Wittgenstein would have to reject such an analogy as false. He was very critical of the way that philosophers are tempted to see the natural sciences as a model for their inquiries.

An especially instructive case study in philosophical language is given for ethical language in Wittgenstein’s 1929 “Lecture on Ethics.” Wittgenstein discusses the way in which ethical language seems to elevate itself above mundane meaning and sense and reach toward something higher:

Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, natural meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it. I said that so far as facts and propositions are concerned there is only relative value and relative good, right, etc. And let me, before I go on, illustrate this by a rather obvious example. The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such a predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, ‘the absolutely right road.’ I think it would be the road which everybody on seeing it would, with logical necessity, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera.

The ethical philosopher, according to Wittgenstein, wishes to express the inexpressible. Ethical language tries to extricate itself from the bounds of sense. Philosophical language in general is not a new language with new tasks, but remains our ordinary language, unable to perform any of its tasks. The notion that if there were such a thing as the absolutely right road in an ethical sense, we would take it with logical necessity, points back to Wittgenstein’s
Tractarian conception of the truths of logic as tautologies. The claims of ethics are non-logical, but their truth seems to follow in some way from the meaning of the words they contain. Their truth would imply that they are true in the way that logical propositions are true—recognizable as true by everyone. In this sense, if philosophers could ever discover something true, philosophical debate on that topic would be impossible. This seems to be what Wittgenstein expressed in the *Philosophical Investigations*: “If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.” 16

There is something of a parallel between Wittgenstein’s conception of logical truths and Marx’s critique of Hegel’s sort of ‘logic.’ One must bear in mind, however, that when Marx refers to logical categories, he is talking about Hegelian abstractions, not the logical variables or connectives with which Wittgenstein was familiar. For Marx, the philosophical/logical categories such as Being or Matter cannot give us the sort of knowledge that comes from analyzing the concrete attributes of things, but are treated by metaphysicians as somehow affording knowledge of the world. Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel is foundational in this respect: “The determinations that afford real knowledge are always only those that determine the object by the object itself, namely, by its own individual determinations; thus, they are not general determinations, as the logical-metaphysical determinations are, which determine no object because they extend to all objects without distinction.” 17 For example, we do not learn anything by contemplating the nature of ‘Being,’ an important category for Hegel. Marx’s principal critique of Hegel in his 1843 *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State* is as follows: “He does not develop his thought from the object, but instead the object is constructed according to a system of thought perfected in the abstract sphere of logic.” 18 Thus, while Hegel’s actual knowledge of the world can only come from empirical investigation, he organizes and interprets this knowledge as if it contained within itself the necessary development of logical categories.

In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx’s critique of Proudhon, he returns to the critique of Hegelian metaphysics, challenging the philosophical belief that by abstracting from all of the concrete details of the world one penetrates to the core of things, to deeper truths. Criticizing Proudhon’s method of economic analysis, he writes,

Apply this [Hegelian] method to the categories of political economy, and you have the logic and metaphysics of political economy, or, in other words, you have the economic categories that everybody knows, translated into a little-known language which makes them look as if they had newly blossomed forth in an intellect of pure reason; so much do these categories seem to engender one another, to be linked up and intertwined with one another by the very working of the dialectic movement. 19

Like he did in 1843, Marx is criticizing the Hegelian method of developing “truths” from abstract logical categories. The economic-cum-philosophical categories can appear to work together, to “engender one another,” but they do not afford us any knowledge of the actual role of economic categories in social life. The “little-known language,” on a Wittgensteinian reading, is merely ordinary language abstracted from its realm of applicability, or language gone on holiday.
The Illusory Journey From Language to Life

Marx’s most detailed analysis of the philosophical use of language is given in The German Ideology. His basic assumption is as follows: “Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well, and only therefore does it also exist for me; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.” 20 While language derives its significance from a social context, it seems to detach itself from this context in religion and ideological discourse in general, once society has divided into classes, and a division between manual and intellectual labor has developed. According to Marx, “From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of ‘pure’ theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc.” 21 While Wittgenstein put forward no such analysis of the social basis for our tendency to philosophize, there is a clear similarity between Marx and Wittgenstein’s emphasis on the use that language has in our everyday lives, and our tendency to forget about such things in philosophy, whether intentionally or unintentionally. If consciousness cannot actually be something other than consciousness of existing practice, as Marx implies, this is quite similar to saying that language cannot escape the boundaries of “natural meaning and sense,” to use Wittgenstein’s words. This seems to be the core of the anti-philosophical perspective with which we are concerned. While ‘pure’ theory or philosophy must somehow descend to earth to explain all manner of earthly phenomena, such an ostensibly enlightening journey is just as illusory as the very independence of philosophical language itself.

Marx and Wittgenstein sometimes contrast ordinary language and philosophical language so as to break the spell of the latter, so to speak. In The Holy Family, Marx mocks the method of speculative philosophy, whereby an abstract category like “fruit” is made to appear as the essence and animating principle of particular fruits, such as apples and pears. A seemingly ordinary category, such as “fruit,” can become a very mystical thing when used within a Hegelian discourse. Marx writes,

If from real apples, pears, strawberries and almonds I form the general idea “Fruit,” if I go further and imagine that my abstract idea “Fruit,” derived from real fruit, is an entity existing outside me, is indeed the true essence of the pear, the apple, etc.; then, in the language of speculative philosophy I am declaring that “Fruit” is the substance of the pear, the apple, the almond, etc. ... The ordinary man does not think he is saying anything extraordinary when he states that there are apples and pears. But if the philosopher expresses those existences in the speculative way he says something extraordinary. He works a wonder by producing the real natural being, the apple, the pear, etc., out of the unreal being of reason “Fruit,” i.e., by creating those fruits out of his own abstract reason, which he considers as an Absolute Subject outside himself, represented here as “Fruit.” 22

The speculative philosopher must accomplish a descent from the abstract to the concrete. The philosopher gives the impression that he or she “works a wonder,” or produces knowledge of some sort, when in fact what takes place is only a play of concepts. Marx’s general conclusion about the Hegelian method in this respect is that its descent from the
abstract to the concrete cannot have any reasonable justification, and cannot be said to accomplish what it aims to accomplish. It is not that speculative philosophy tells us something erroneous about the world, but rather that despite supposedly revealing the deepest truths, it is unable to tell us anything.

Wittgenstein also wrote of the philosophical tendency to give a general category such as “Fruit” an unreal particularity. He claims that we have a tendency to treat all words as if they were proper names, thinking that there must be a thing or an image correlated with a word, which encapsulates its meaning. In The Blue Book, Wittgenstein contrasts particular leaves with the general idea of a leaf, writing that, “we are inclined to think that the general idea of a leaf is something like a visual image, but one which only contains what is common to all leaves.” Such subtle tendencies are part of a widespread philosophical craving for generality, according to Wittgenstein. It is not hard to see how such tendencies can contribute to the metaphysics of “Fruit,” in which the general category is given a real existence as the fruity essence that realizes itself in particular fruits. By treating the general category as a particular object, our words seem to take on a more or less autonomous existence. When we speak of the inter-relations of such super-concepts, for example the relation of Fruit to Pear, we want to say something other than something about fruits and pears. What we want to say, however, cannot be translated into ordinary language. It is not that we have simply decided to use a new terminology, as such a specialized terminology should be in principle translatable into ordinary language. The problem for philosophers, then, is to describe the world without translating their language into ordinary language, through some sort of conceptual descent from the abstract to the concrete, or from language to life.

In The German Ideology, Marx relates his basic analysis of philosophical language to the idea of “descending from language to life”:

One of the most difficult tasks confronting philosophers is to descend from the world of thought to the actual world. Language is the immediate actuality of thought. Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they were bound to make language into an independent realm. This is the secret of philosophical language, in which thoughts in the form of words have their own content. The problem of descending from the world of thoughts to the actual world is turned into the problem of descending from language to life. 24

The secret of philosophical language is that words seem to be imbued with some substantial content without deriving this content from social life itself. The problem of descending from language to life is basically an illusory problem, one that would not exist if philosophers did not “make language into an independent realm.”

Even some philosophers who criticize metaphysical thinking are unable to break free from it, as they do not pay sufficient attention to real history and social relations. In The German Ideology, Ludwig Feuerbach and Max Stirner are put in this category. Stirner in particular raged against all ideals raised above the desires of the unique individual, a seemingly anti-philosophical stance. Marx, however, criticizes Stirner for wishing to descend from language to life simply by substituting a new category, the ‘unique’, for the old abstractions. Marx writes,
We have seen that the whole problem of the transition from thought to reality, hence from language to life, exists only in philosophical illusion, i.e., it is justified only for philosophical consciousness, which cannot possibly be clear about the nature and origin of its apparent separation from life. This great problem, insofar as it all entered the minds of our ideologists, was bound, of course, to result finally in one of these knights-errant setting out in search of a word which, as a word, formed the transition in question, which, as a word, ceases to be simply a word, and which, as a word, in a mysterious superlinguistic manner, points from within language to the actual object it denotes; which, in short, plays among words the same role as the Redeeming God-Man plays among people in Christian fantasy. The emptiest, shallowest brain among the philosophers had to ‘end’ philosophy by proclaiming his lack of thought to be the end of philosophy and thus the triumphant entry into ‘corporeal’ life. 25

Even Stirner is said to be constrained by the philosophical imperative to descend from language to life. While Stirner attributed a moralistic perspective to Marx, in Marx’s view, Stirner, despite his ranting against morality, could only see the world from an abstract moral perspective, and sing the praises of the a-historical ‘unique’ individual.

**Bringing Language Home**

The above analysis implies that the philosophers are not wrong in the sense that their errors could be replaced with correct philosophical propositions or theses. Their tasks and their questions are not the tasks or questions of either Marx or Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein’s philosophical task is to lay bare the confusions in philosophical questions by highlighting the grammar of our language and its social context. Philosophical language is then recognized as merely ordinary language used in a mystifying manner. Marx expressed this latter point in *The German Ideology*: “The philosophers have only to dissolve their language into the ordinary language, from which it is abstracted, in order to recognise it as the distorted language of the actual world, and to realise that neither thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own, that they are only **manifestations** of actual life.” 26 The philosophers must come to recognize that the seeming independence of their language is illusory. Wittgenstein wished to actively dissolve the mystique of philosophical language, and came to see philosophy as having this essentially therapeutic task. Philosophy does not uncover truths, but it can help one to see things from a new vantage point. It can do this by pointing to the many ways in which ordinary language actually functions, thus revealing the poverty of analyses that posit some fixed structure of meaning lying somewhere beyond or behind language. Wittgenstein is very clear on this point in the *Philosophical Investigations*: “When philosophers use a word—‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘object’, ‘I’, ‘proposition’, ‘name’—and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language which is its original home?—What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.” 27 In asking about the way words are actually used, we can come to recognize philosophical language as “the distorted language of the actual world,” to use Marx’s phrase, no longer grasping for some elusive meaning existing outside of ordinary language.
When we bring language back home, so to speak, we see the senselessness of many questions, which before seemed rather profound and exerted upon us a powerful influence. There is of course no guarantee that anyone will be satisfied with this resolution to not allow language to go on holiday, but perhaps they will become conscious of the limitations of philosophical inquiry. Interestingly, this Wittgensteinian theme of questioning philosophical questions is present in Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*. Marx addresses the question of an otherworldly Creator by first discussing the mundane creation of human beings through reproduction, the circular movement “whereby man reproduces himself.” 28 Marx discusses this topic with an imaginary creationist:

But you will reply: I grant you this circular movement, but you will also grant me the right to progress back to the question: Who begot the first man, and nature in general? I can only answer: Your question is itself a product of abstraction. Ask yourself how you arrived at that question. Ask yourself whether your question does not arise from a standpoint to which I cannot reply because it is a perverse one. Ask yourself whether that progression exists as such for rational thought. If you ask about the creation of nature and of man, then you are abstracting from nature and from man. You assume them as *non-existent* and want me to prove to you that they *exist*. My answer is: Give up your abstraction and you will then give up your question. 29

Marx is clearly attempting to free us from the mystifying influence of a question. While Marx uses the language of ‘abstraction,’ Wittgenstein would perhaps have analyzed the grammar of ‘creation’ or ‘begetting.’ The essential point seems to be that the creationist asks a certain type of question outside of the context in which such questions have meaning.

**Conclusion**

While I have only discussed one theme of Marx and Wittgenstein’s work on which their ideas seem to overlap, this theme of philosophical language or language on holiday seems to be essential to their respective goals. This does not mean that Marx would necessarily approve of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, or that Wittgenstein would not have identified philosophical confusion in Marx. Nonetheless, in discussing language, Marx clearly had some Wittgensteinian moments. Wittgenstein, for his part, never really sought to analyze the social roots of philosophical confusion, but there is a clear indication in his *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* that he thought philosophical problems did in fact have social roots: “The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of philosophical problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and of life, not through a medicine invented by an individual.” 30 It is, after all, our ‘mode of life’ that grounds our use of language. This understanding of language is a central theme of the anti-philosophical stance found in Marx and Wittgenstein. While our language only has meaning in a social context, philosophical language seems to ‘go on holiday,’ to detach itself from the flow of life. In highlighting this phenomenon, Marx and Wittgenstein contributed much to deflating the often-unwarranted pretensions of philosophical work.
Notes

11. Ibid., § 464.
12. Ibid., § 132.
21. Ibid., 45.

25. Ibid., 449.

26. Ibid., 447.


29. Ibid., 357.