Submitted: 18/01/2024 - Accepted: 17/03/2024 - Published: 29/04/2024

The most valuable Discussion about the Nature of Language that never took place *from Wittgenstein to Baldwin via Calvino*

Warmhold Jan Thomas Mollema

Utrecht University, Nederland
w.j.t.mollema@students.uu.nl

DOI: 10.26417/c7gxwk61

Abstract

This paper orchestrates a theoretical dialogue between James Baldwin and Ludwig Wittgenstein, two profound intellects deeply concerned with the functional capacities of language and the intrinsic societal duties of the thinker. By utilizing Italo Calvino's literary philosophy regarding the porous boundary between writing and the material world as a conceptual bridge, this study systematically investigates the underlying ethics of meaning. A critical contrast is established between Wittgenstein's philosophical quietism—epitomized by his assertion that philosophy "leaves everything as it is"—and Baldwin's urgent, morally engaged perspective on systemic racism, the weaponization of vocabulary, and the civic imperative of the writer. Ultimately, this analysis argues that Baldwin effectively propels Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy beyond its own self-imposed analytical boundaries. The research concludes that the very concept of ethically neutral language use is not merely an academic illusion, but a fundamental linguistic confusion that obscures the inherent socio-political gravity of human discourse

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Calvino, Baldwin, language, ethics of meaning

Introduction

"However what do you do with something that can neither be told, nor can be kept silent? Hasn't Wittgenstein written something about this? He said that one should be silent of that which one cannot speak of; yes, well, but what should one do if you cannot speak, cannot keep silent, and cannot forget. *Herr* Wittgenstein? I have no idea, but this I do know: man suffers because of the things he cannot forget, cannot

speak of and cannot keep silent about, and in the end, those things will become his death."

Mohamed Mbougar Sarr – *The Most Secret Memory of Men*[1]

Ludwig Wittgenstein and James Baldwin had the most intriguing discussion about the nature of language that never took place. For a start, the two thinkers never met. Baldwin made his move to Paris to become a writer only towards the end of Wittgenstein's final years, who succumbed to the cancer that had plagued him for years in 1951, even well before the publication of Baldwin's debut *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (1953). In fact, Baldwin has never as much as mentioned Wittgenstein in any his later writings. However, this discussion this thereby fictional discussion can be reimagined and simulated in the guise of this text. This essay details the meeting point between the writing of Wittgenstein and that of Baldwin and aims to capture the discourse which consolidates the ideas of the two authors.

On the face of it, the two thinkers could not be more different. There are, however some significant similarities. Firstly, both are often compared to Socrates. In Wittgenstein's case, this was due to his unrelenting search for truth that epitomized his life while for Baldwin it was because of his advocacy for social justice. The comparisons with Socrates do not incorporate all of Socrates' attributes: for Wittgenstein as well as Baldwin are only similar to Socrates in one salient aspect. For the readers that thought the comparison to Socrates was only a trivial philosophical trope, there are other similarities which form the basis of this essay. Each of the writers pays great attention to (1) *what language use is capable of* and (2) *what the duty of the thinker should be*. I will examine what the contrast Wittgenstein/Baldwin tells us about the relationship between thinking and the world and about the ethics of meaning. At the end of this examination I conclude that Baldwin drives Wittgenstein's philosophical position further than Wittgenstein could do himself and I explain how ethically neutral language use is itself a linguistic confusion.

Before giving substance to this peregrination and that closing argument, I will give an outline of the thought processes of the two authors in their discourse. With respect to Wittgenstein I will focus on his analytic rigor with respect to language and the role that the connection between language use and meaning has in the conceptions of philosophy in both (i) the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and (ii) the *Philosophical Investigations.* (iii) The ideas of Italian writer Italo Calvino shall be applied to elucidate the connection between the two thinkers, after which (iv) I will discuss what Baldwin's novels say about racism, humanity and being a writer. Baldwin's thoughts on language and the duty of the writer are expressed most effectively in his nonfiction work. Subsequently (v) I will delve into the relationship

[1] Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, *De diepst verborgen herinnering van de mens* [*The Most Secret Memory of Men*], trans. Jelle Noorman, Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Atlas Contact, 2022), p. 53; translation by the author.

between man and world in the emerging of language to form a basis for discussing (vi) the duty of the thinker and the ethics of meaning. The movements of thought that the turns of the meeting follow, reveal what it means to speak and write and what the potential of language is in the face of the world; this is what makes this discussion the most valuable that never had place.

Methodology

The present study is a philosophical reflection on the literary and essayistic work of James Baldwin and the philosophical work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. To engage in a philosophical reflection on literary and theoretical ideas requires practicing qualitative (i) analysis and (ii) synthesis. In these two types of nor- mative evaluation, the author must function as an interpretative rendezvous for the ideas in separate bodies of work. (i) The analytic movement in this type of reflection is to deconstruct the work of an author into its principal ideas. (ii) The synthetic movement reconstructs an argument or contemplation using multiple of said principal ideas. The result of the analysis and synthesis is a novel discourse on the intersection between the work of several authors, structured by normative arguments expounded by the author.

The consideration of Baldwin's literary output and his essayistic output (anthologized in the Col- lected Essays, edited by Toni Morrison) was executed systematically and the most salient texts and excerpts were interpreted by the author to be included in this study. Specific attention has been devoted to gleaning Baldwin's assertions on the nature of language from the texts. Likewise, what are canoni- cally considered Wittgenstein's most important works (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Philosophical Investigations) were studied to construct an outline of his ideas with respect to the relation between language and world. Both Baldwin's and Wittgenstein's works have been summarized and interpreted by the author in what follows. (Idem for the works of Italo Calvino and other works that have been reviewed, which have been supplemented into the discussion where it was deemed elucidatory.)

The relation between language and world

Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was quite strict on philosophy and language, placing tight restrictions on language use. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* he specifically barred what he considered to be 'nonsense' from the definition of meaningful sentences. His view was that sentences that do not, as facts, logically picture the world cannot convey anything meaningful. Wittgenstein wrote that the world consists of all true facts, namely "the totality of facts, not of things",[1] as he stated infamously and cryptically in 1921.

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. W.F. Hermans (Amsterdam: Athenaeum—Polak & Van Gennep, 1975 [2006]), thesis 1.1; thesis 3.01; hereafter abbreviated *TLP* and in the following references the term 'thesis' will be omitted.

Since I first read the little thin, dark, book in 2019, I have not forgotten what Wittgenstein told me. 'Facts are representations of a state of affairs, logical pictures of the world, which may or may not correspond to reality' was one of the key messages of his theses (*TLP,* 2.1; 2.13; 2.131). Because of this corresponding effect, all facts we can formulate form a structure with interrelationships, because the fact shows *how* things stand. So a fact can be true or false in that things are as the fact depicts them to be (*TLP,* 2.032; 2.21). The sentence or assertion that expresses a fact shares a logical form with what it depicts (*TLP,* 2.2). This is something impossible to articulate, but can be explained by comparison.[1] Consider, for example, the imprint of a hand in wet cement and the hand itself. Here the logical relationship between the image and the depiction is the same as with the sentence 'It rains in Harare' and the corresponding state of affairs, if it is actually raining in Harare.

To see what Wittgenstein considered to be the duty of the thinker, what he deemed philosophizing, we need to understand even better how language relates to the world and to man's thinking in that world. What language can do is to factually describe the world by depicting the world logically. Philosophy thereby becomes "the logical clarification of thoughts" (*TLP,* 4.122). This illustrates analyzing language for the purpose of understanding, by pointing out terms and statements that don't actually mean anything because, according to Wittgenstein, they can't say anything about the world (*TLP,* 6.53). Unproblematic sentences can be distinguished from gibberish or bullshit because each sentence has only one complete analysis that leads to either its truth or falsity (*TLP,* 3.25). The thinker's analysis breaks the sentence down into its constituent parts, confirming the relationships of those constituent parts to things in the world. This is delineating the domain of meaning and separating sense from nonsense, because the analysis of a sentence also tells us that some sentences can never be true.

The classical picture of the relationship between thought and reality therefore finds its most refined expression in the *Tractatus*: the essence of language is describing and naming, with the connection between words and their meaning being the things they name and describe (Hacker, 1996, p. 23; p. 29).

No meaningful statements can therefore be made about ethics – even though they were not unimportant to Wittgenstein. Indeed, all those statements, such as 'Thou shalt not kill,' 'Love thy neighbor,' etc., are not factual representations of things and are therefore nonsense, which is to say, an image that *does not represent anything*, is *no image all* (*TLP,* 2.221). Ethical statements thus violate the logical boundaries of sense (Hacker, 1996, pp. 35-36). Language reaches out to the world, as such the image is connected to reality. *That is all there is to it* (*TLP,* 2.151).

Wittgenstein's Encore: Use, Meaning and confusion

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, 2nd ed., eds. Georg H. von Wright and Gertrude E.M. Anscombe, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961 [1971]), 29.10.14, p. 20e.

In his later work, the *Philosophical Investigations*, which I read on the eve of the COVID19-epidemic, alternately bathed in sweat on a fitness bike in the basement throughout spring or running around with a baby in a carrier in that beautiful year 2020, Wittgenstein's views on the relationship between man and language had changed. Even so, he was no less rigorous with regard to language and philosophical affairs. He unmasked philosophical problems as grammatical diseases of language founded on language that does not follow the implicit rules of usage. For example, the last book he was still working on until just before his death, *On Certainty*, which I read a little over 69 years after his death, deals with all sorts of misconceptions about epistemological concepts such as 'knowing,' radical doubt as a philosophical method and assumptions about the origin of knowledge – all of which are ideas made possible by uses of words that have led us astray.[1]

'Only by paying attention to how certain words are imperceptibly torn out of their grammatical context can one get rid of confusions in language' his books told me. The way of thinking required for this is to bring words from their nonsensical use back to their "everyday use."[2] Traditional philosophy tends to look for a 'hidden essence' behind everyday usage, but then one runs the risk of being trapped by a nonsensical or incorrect image (*PI,* §§90-92). This method, which is new in comparison to the *Tractatus* (for the philosophy of the *Tractatus* can also be seen as a search for a hidden essence, that of language), is a conceptual activity that seeks to describe what is already visible. Gluttonously I took in Wittgenstein'e1s *tours de force*. His texts demonstrated to me that the *actual use of language* gives words and sentences their meaning and beyond this, nothing needs to be understood.

The *Philosophical Investigations* talks about 'forms of life', people, institutions, groups and other animals, using language. This use gives language meaning. Using language is called a 'language game', about which a few things are important to know. First, language games have no fixed attribute because the patterns in the fabric of life are irregular in their variety. Language games are linked by overlapping similarities, without all having one thing in common (family resemblance) (*PI,* §67). There is no one aspect that defines all forms of play, all emotions, all forms of language use as *what* they are. They are related through "a complicated net of similarities that overlap and intersect; sometimes fundamental similarities, sometimes similarities in details" (*PI*, §66). Second, thoughts have meaning once they are used as part of a language game: because they have been used publicly as words, grafted onto the form of life.[3] Through contemplating language games, the more or less fuzzy bounds of our concepts reveal themselves to us, and these form the conditions for the applicability of language games to life. Nonsense results from

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Over zekerheid* [*On Certainty*], trans. Sybe Terwee, (Meppel: Boom, 1977).
[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Filosofische onderzoekingen* [*Philosophical Investigations*], trans. Hans W. Bakx, (Meppel: Boom, 1976), §116, p. 85; hereafter abbreviated *PI.*
[3] Wittgenstein, *Knipsels* [*Zettel*], trans. Wilfred Oranje, (Meppel: Boom, 1995), §494, p. 112.

a language game that is not played according to the rules of that conceptual grammar.

The use of language and meaning are therefore one and the same. Wittgenstein realized that language is formed against the background of the human history of previous language use. Meaning is therefore founded in an implicit natural history; a history into which an individual is initiated by learning language and internalizing language games. This is why Jorge Luis Borges' statement that generations of people polish a proverb is true.[1] With every invocation of a (proverbial) word, the lifeline of that utterance with its past is brought to the present; the utterance derives its meaning from the way a word is applied to life. The whole idea of literature as Borges shaped it was as a continuation of the literature of others, whether those others were classical, modern, or as often in his case, *fictional*.[2] To use language, then, is to relate to others from the outset. As such, language, is a toolbox handed to you by others, and words are tools with different use values that, with each use, you yourself also hand to others, whether that use originated with you or with those who handed you the tools in the first place (*PI*, §11).

After these wanderings amidst the earlier and later Wittgenstein, we have finally gained insight into his views on thought and language. For Wittgenstein, then, philosophical problems were only simulacra of problems that distract from what can be meaningfully said. The philosopher's duty is to undo the distorting effect of confusing language, but this has no effect on the world and 'leaves everything as it is'.

In this sense, the author of the *Tractatus* and the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* agree: philosophizing leads to a better understanding of the world, but not to changes in the world itself.

Calvino's two positions

It may be difficult to understand why language 'leaves the world as it is'. It took me a long time to understand why that statement made me uncomfortable. In conversation with Wittgenstein, it occurred to me that it was made crystal clear what *can* and *cannot* be said; when language rips the implicit coherence of the concepts it renders out of joint and when the rules of the game are followed precisely. But the concept of language leaving the world as it is, that specifically collided with my own constellation of concepts.

Looking ahead to what I have to say about him in the next paragraph, I feel I must tell you in advance that the exact opposite made me fall in love with James Baldwin's

[1] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Man on the Threshold," in *The Aleph*, collected in *Collected Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges*, trans. Andrew Hurley, (London: The Pinguin Press), p. 545.

[2] Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium,* trans. Patrick Creagh, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 50; herafter abbreviated *SM.* See also Wittgenstein's famous 'private language arguments', about which it is agreed that they show that a language 'that only I myself understand' (i.e. without any relationship to another understanding human being) is an impossibility.

books in 2021, after the above Wittgensteinian puritanism had led to some disillusionment. For Baldwin, it is uncontroversial that writing, speaking, thinking and reading – every use of language – change the world one word at a time. The interaction or lack of interaction with language is morally charged, depending on *who uses what language to accomplish what goal*. When you begin to believe just *that,* the tension that makes the hypothetical discussion between Wittgenstein and Baldwin so interesting arises, thanks to the diurnal visibility of this interface of apparent opposites.

In the meantime, I have come to understand Wittgenstein's statement a little better. Writer Italo Calvino, perhaps motivated precisely by the understanding of Wittgenstein's perspective on language, thought and the world, has a dreamed philosopher declare in his book *Invisible Cities* that "Signs constitute a language, but not that language you think you know."[1] The signs of language, our words, are fleeting images that seemingly derive their meaning from their use as references to existing things and processes – think of the picture theory of meaning from the *Tractatus*. The language you think you know is not the language that emerges when the use of language is viewed from the light shed on it by the patterns of forms of life reaching into the past. One need not go beyond everyday usage.

Calvino also thought about the relation between language and the world and he described the tension between the two ways to approach that relation as follows:

The mind of the writer is obsessed by the contrasting positions. The first says: The world doesn't exist; only language exists. The second says: Common language has no meaning; the world is ineffable.

For the first, the materiality of language is raised above a world of shadows; for the second, it's the world that looms as a mute stone sphinx over a desert of words, like sand carried by the wind. […] Both represent a challenge for the writer: the first requires the use of a language that responds only to itself, to its internal laws; the second, the use of a language that can face up to the silence of the world. Both exert on me their fascination and their influence. That means that I end up not following either, that I don't believe in either. What do I believe in, then?[2]

It is the second position described by Calvino that Wittgenstein defends in the *Tractatus*. The essence of language is the logical, factual relationship between the sentence and things in the world. There is also textual evidence for this, as Calvino describes Wittgenstein's attitude towards language in one of his lectures from *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* as ""For what is hidden ... is of no interest to us."" (*SM*, p.77) .

[1] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities,* trans. William Weaver, (San Diego: Harcourt & Brace Company, 1974), p. 48.
[2] Italo Calvino, "The Written World and the Unwritten World," *The Paris Review* (01/05/2023). https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2023/01/05/the-written-world-and-the-unwritten-world/.

The *Philosophical Investigations* brings a nuance to this by relegating the foundation of meaning into language use itself, embedded in the world, moving the later Wittgenstein closer to Calvino's first position. With language, things are acted out in the world, but thought is fleeting and leaves the world as it is. However, Wittgenstein's analytical understanding of muddled language use remains in the shadow of Calvino's mute sphinx; language is founded in the world but does not transcend it. Calvino himself does not want to go that far either. He argues that the use of words to describe visible, invisible, feared and desired things in the world is related to humans' mental processes as already present in our prehistoric ancestors. "For this reason," he continues, "the proper use of language, for me personally, is one that enables us to approach things (present or absent) with discretion, attention, and caution, with respect for what things (present or absent) communicate without words" (*SM*, p.77) .

This approach to the world with language is characteristic of Calvino's descriptive style, as he exhibits, for example, in the eccentric, overly contemplative and analytical *Mr Palomar*: translating the unwritten into the written, "to the sum of what is sayable and not sayable" (*SM*, p.74). Whether Palomar is looking at the waves of the sea and analyzing them into wave function equivalents; watching mating turtles and questioning the richness of their mental life; cracking his head about the origin of swarms of pigeons, the right attitudinal stance to respect sunbathing women or how to observe the night' sky; the thoughts he has approach things with thoughtfulness and dissect them into possible meanings and ways of relating to other things.[1] Palomar pushes Wittgensteinian philosophizing to its limits, but it is there that his linguistic relationship with things shows something uniquely un-Wittgensteinian: to have thoughts, to express them or, conversely, to conceal them, is to set up a relationship with the world" (*SM*, p.75).

That relationship, to things, people and other animals, is a *moral* relationship and takes us into the realm of words, world and meaning from Wittgenstein to James Baldwin via Calvino.

Baldwin: On racism and humanity

Calvino was clearly obsessed with the stalemate of those two positions, with the tension between the exactness of logic and the lightness of colloquial language. But James Baldwin (1924-1984) also vacillates between Calvino's obsessions of the writer. The only distinctive difference here is that according to Wittgenstein, language has yet to *remain silent about which it cannot speak*, yet with Baldwin both speaking and writing are politicized and are founded in a *moral* world. As such, language cannot but change the world.

Baldwin is renowned as an essayist, novelist and social critic from New York's Harlem, but between the lines of his books his philosophy of life shines through. In

[1] Italo Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, (London: Random House, 1999).

his essays and novels, you can detect philosophical wonder and skeptical remarks about racism, nationalism, Pan-Africanism and Christendom as ideological subterfuge. With human beings in the crosshairs, Baldwin reflected on what emotions and events bind people, but also more importantly, what break them, dehumanize and humiliate them. Baldwin's motifs are palpable. The descriptions of New York jazz bars and Italian restaurants give color to the life that was led there. His books attest to the importance of music in Harlem culture through his frequent use of quotes from song lyrics; whether in the form of traditional songs, Black Evangelical gospel, hits by Billie Holiday and Ray Charles or blues by Ethel Waters.

With *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Baldwin made everyone feel the ideology of institutional racism as lived experience. This is evident in the story of young love between 19-year-old Tish and Fonny, jailed for a crime he did not commit. Baldwin exposes to the reader Black powerlessness in the face of white prejudice with the precariousness of Tish and Fonny's fledgling happiness, as it only took one police officer to get Fonny locked up, with whom the officer still had a bone to pick. To compound the situation, Tish was pregnant with Fonny's baby and it was up to her to prove Fonny's innocence.[1] Baldwin here shows many of the contours of true love, racial hatred and African-American culture without falling into a victim narrative.

Another work in which Baldwin explores the obstacles that having a certain appearance and socio-economic background put someone in twentieth-century New York up against is *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*.[2] The novel interweaves the universal themes of desire and personal development with the contemptuous attitude of the white American world towards the aspirations of African-Americans. Main character Leo Proudhammer is a renowned theatre actor from the slums of Harlem, who is felled by a heart attack. Immersed in Leo's memories, the reader experiences the story of a man who has struggled in every single aspect of life, from the acceptance of his qualities on stage, to his love affairs with his white acting partner Barbara (in Leo's youth) and (later in life) with the younger, Black radical Christopher.

Before writing *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Baldwin approached the imposition of racism on humanity from a different angle in *Another Country*. With the elaboration of the characters in this book, he canvassed how internalizing racist prejudice psychologically devastates African-Americans. The jumping to his death from a bridge of protagonist and jazz musician Rufus effectively nullified any possible skepticism about the reality and severity of that psychological devastation after the publication of *Another Country* in 1962. But as is the case in all Baldwin's books, not only racism but also the rough surface of life itself is made into the subject of the work. Rufus destroys those around him as a result of the internalization of the hatred he himself experiences as a Black man. In

[1] James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, (London: Penguin Books, 1974).
[2] James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, (London: Penguin Books, 1968).

his interracial relationships, he breaks down his partners, but he cannot do otherwise, because the self-hatred demanded an outlet; it had to wreak revenge on their whiteness. With Leona, a woman from the South, this leads to tantrums and him abusing her, and in Rufus' affair with Eric, a successful actor, this manifested in how he deeply humiliates Eric.

The analysis of Rufus' suffering takes place through the eyes of sister Ida and his Irish best friend Vivaldo. This suffering seeps into their own love affair: "'Sweetheart, suffering doesn't have a color. Does it?'," laments Vivaldo in conversation with Ida. They cannot bring themselves to believe that Rufus' downfall doesn't stand firm in between them, between everyone who bears the loss of his life, bringing out bewilderment, disillusionment and taking out frustration on others. Characteristically Ida discloses her father's reaction to Rufus' autopsy:

'When we saw Rufus's body, I can't tell you. My father stared at it, and stared at it. It didn't look like Rufus, it was – terrible – from the water, and he must have *struck* something going down, or in the water, because he was so broken and lumpy – and ugly. *My* brother. And my father stared at it – at it – and he said, "They don't leave a man much, do they?" His own father was beaten to death with a hammer by a railroad guard. And they brought his father home like that. My mother got frightened, she wanted my father to pray. And he said, he shouted it at the top of his lungs, "Pray? *Who*, pray? I bet you, if I ever get anywhere near that white devil you call God, I'll tear my son and my father out of his white hide! Don't you ever say the word Pray to me again, woman, not if you want to *live.*" Then he started to cry. I'll never forget it. Maybe I hadn't loved him before but I loved him then. That was the last time he ever shouted, he hasn't raised his voice since.'

The suffering of others is the suffering of all, but we cannot imagine that the world we live through and performatively enable together distributes hatred and suffering equally among us. 'No, Vivaldo, suffering *does* have a color,' seems to be Baldwin's message.[1]

The manner in which Baldwin chronicled his own experiences surrounding the civil rights movement of the 1950s-60s, including his interactions with Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers, also shows how deeply imbued Baldwin was with the moral burden of pursuing justice and the militancy, hope and persuasion required to do so. His eyes witnessed that the price of justice is often life itself.[2] Baldwin used his essays and books as a mouthpiece for protecting the heartbeat of defeatist morality left in the shadow of the murders of those figureheads of the African-American community. This brings to light an unpleasant fact, namely that what his characters live through, the love, pain, grief and struggles of Leo, Tish and

[1] James Baldwin, *Another Country*, (London: Penguin Books, 1962; see p. 408 for the first citation and for the second see p. 407.

[2] James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972), in *Collected Essays,* ed. Toni Morrison, (New York: The Library of America, 1998); pp. 433-448.

Fonny, Rufus, Ida and Vivaldo, is not just a performance, a poignant concoction, but is a fragmented biography of Baldwin's own loved ones, their social environment and himself. Other work, such as *The Devil Finds Work* or *No Name in the Street*, is therefore entirely autobiographical.

Baldwin's writing has an undeniably emotive and incendiary effect. After reading essays like *Color* and *The White Man's Guilt*, I was steeped in the reality of racism and the disgusting historical denial implied by the idea of white supremacy. Baldwin saw that human identity is held together by love and hate, struggle and history. In *Color*, he described being Black as the continuous experience of violence and sexual and social threats as ever-present possibilities.[1] It is in this essayistic work that Baldwin emerges more fully as a philosopher of the reconstruction of history, morality and thought by each person herself. These are ideas that have exerted great influence on what is today called 'Black Existentialism'. The emotional urgency with which he makes that philosophy imitable and penetrating, especially for the white people whose worldview he contests and addresses, is, in my view, unique and has made me, as a white man who checks all the boxes of privilege, look at myself and my privileges differently.

The following passage from *The White Man's Guilt* shows precisely the force of his prose, which, just like with his novels, arises from his autobiographical angle:

White man, hear me! History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.

[…] My point of view is certainly formed by my history, and it is probable that only a creature despised by history finds history a questionable matter. On the other hand, people who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of changing themselves, or the world.[2]

Against the backdrop of the political thought of MLK and Malcolm X, the Pan-Africanism of W. E. B. Du Bois and the French existentialism of Frantz Fanon, Baldwin developed his own view of humanity that emphasized above all the responsibility of white people to change themselves. The above quotation makes it clear that the ignorant history of being white is itself a problem. The existence of racism is not a problem of the man born Black, but of the white man who *continues* the history handed to him, *does not question it* and in the problematization of the African-American *loses and abnegates* his own identity. White people should no

[1] James Baldwin, "Color" (1962), in *Collected Essays*, p. 675; hereafter abbreviated *"C."*
[2] James Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt" (1965), in *Collected Essays*, pp. 722-723.

longer erase the history of others for the sake of a historical reconstruction their own, but rather they should understand their own role in that history.

Philosopher Charles Mills theorized this into the idea of 'white time'. White time is a colonizing abstraction that erases all history other than white history in fundamental contemplations of right and wrong. Non-whites are thus reduced to beings without history, upon whom white history is imposed as the Only One and from whom conformity to the white narrative is demanded.[1] Whiteness, then, is not an innocent ideology of ignorance in Baldwin's eyes. Indeed, he did not see the idea of Black people as property as a spontaneous idea of the people, but as a political idea of the American architects who valued property infinitely higher than human dignity. But this social construction of the opposition of white and Black has the most negative implications precisely for white people, Baldwin argues:

The price the white American paid for his ticket was to become white –: […] the white American has never accepted the real reasons for his journey. I know very well that my ancestors had no desire to come to this place: but neither did the ancestors of the people who became white and who require of my captivity a song. They require of me a song less to celebrate my captivity than to justify their own.[2]

It is the creation of whiteness that imprisons man, and the oppression of something outside him oppresses the very monster that the white man has become by colonizing America and Africa. "A person's freedom can only be judged in terms of his flexibility, his openness towards life; it is not his situation which makes him free, but himself" ("C," p. 676). It is thus an empty endeavor to improve only the situation, the living conditions, the welfare etc. in the hope of curbing racism: it is white people themselves who need to change their attitudes towards life and other people. And "[u]ntil this happens, freedom is only an empty word" ("C," p. 677).

For Baldwin, therefore, reading, writing and speaking[3] were above all means of changing the world. The writer's duty is to mirror society's moral imperfections and make people love, hate, struggle and write history differently. "The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it-at no matter what risk."[4] *That* is what language in the hands of the thinker, the philosopher, aims at.

The role of power in language

With both Wittgenstein and Baldwin, there is a focus on how words convey meaning and how that meaning springs from the use of words. Only, within this framework,

[1] Charles W. Mills, "White Time: The Chronic Injustice of Ideal Theory," *Du Bois Review* 11, no.1 (2014): 27-42.
[2] James Baldwin, "The Price of the Ticket" (1985) in *Collected Essays*, pp. 842-843.
[3] To see that Baldwin was as a potent speaker as he was a writer, I recommend the following documentaries: Dixon's "Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris" (https://mubi.com/nl/films/meeting-the-man-james-baldwin-in-paris) and the recording of the debate between Baldwin and hyperconservative William F. Buckley (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFeoS41xe7w).
[4] James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers" (1963), in *Collected Essays*, p. 679.

Wittgenstein was thinking mostly about grammatical rule following and the employment of psychological concepts in language. Baldwin, on the other hand, argues in his short but rich essay *If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?* that the role of language is to name and to articulate all of the world that surrounds humans, *so as to master it*. Different peoples and forms of life have other worlds to articulate in order to transcend them – for those who do not articulate are literally *subsumed* by the world.[1] This articulation requires not only the cognitive presence of certain concepts. Other urgencies, different ways of coping with life, also give rise to different languages, languages that confess their genealogical history of coming into existence with each and every utterance. According to Baldwin, your spoken and written language confesses who your parents are, what your ancestry, income and age are and, sadly, what your future is. It says something about your future because it confesses that the way you are able to use language stems from the history that got you where you are. Whereas Wittgenstein's approach to language sees convention *either* as the language use of the life form to be understood *or* as a confusion of language, Baldwin sees language conventions as indebted to a power struggle of which words are the vehicles. Of course, not every use of language should be regarded as of equal moral charge, that is, as equally relevant to that power struggle. Why ordinal numbers and ostensive definitions work as they are used, or nouns give the appearance of an existence of the named as a real entity, may be sources of morally neutral language confusions, which, accommodating the wisdom of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, are grafted onto concept constellations. But we must also accommodate Baldwin's insight that language emerges from its relation to the world, and that the contingent moral ways in which language use is embedded in power relations between forms of life and articulating the world apply as more powerful drivers for the development of language the need to 'count' or 'name'.

An example of the relationship between meaning and power relationship is how the position of Black people in slavery was the social necessity for the emergence of Black English: the Black diaspora created language barriers between slaves from different tribes, who, however, had a common political task, which was to survive white oppression. From that struggle for survival, a language *had* to emerge that the oppressor *should not* be able to understand ("*BE,*" p.782). The meaning of this language use was therefore founded in how the language *reveals*, and in this case *was not allowed to reveal*, the speaker or writer for who he is and what his intentions are – "putting one's business in the street," as Baldwin would say – and is linked to the opportunities for survival it created for oppressed African-Americans. For Baldwin, how meaning comes about is thus an ethical and historical matter, while, on the other hand, Wittgenstein was captivated by the relationship of language use to the *ontological status* of the meaning of language use. This interface points to what the Baldwin/Wittgenstein contrast shows about the ethics of

[1] James Baldwin, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" (1979), in *Collected Essays*, p. 780; hereafter abbreviated "*BE*."

meaning. Just as Wittgenstein rightly points to the different possibilities offered by words as tools, Baldwin experienced racial examples of this: the word 'color,' for example, was transformed from a logical, perceptual use by the oppressor to a *racial* use, but was then reappropriated by African-Americans to denote cultural-emotional forms of behavior, in interplay with intonation ("*C*", p. 673).

Where Wittgenstein founds language in the form of life, Baldwin founds the form of life in its social history, in being able to articulate certain aspects of the world in order to accomplish things that *have to happen*: "*A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of language are dictated by what the language must convey*" ("*BE,*" p. 782). Baldwin thus contradicts Wittgenstein's approach by politicizing that approach. It is *not* the conceptual grammar of the form of life that is autonomous and guides the use of language. It is precisely the freedom of the form of life to articulate the world out of a certain necessity, to *oppose* the will of another or, on the contrary, to *impose* a will on another, that guides the meaning of language use. Like Calvino, Baldwin carries Wittgenstein's position further than Wittgenstein himself could do: where for Calvino's Mr Palomar any description of a relation was already the establishment of a moral relation, for Baldwin political relations to others precede the signification of all forms of language use.

The duty of the thinker and the ethics of meaning

The greatest tension between Baldwin's thinking and Wittgenstein's is about what thinking is capable of and the duty of the thinker. For the archangel of analytic philosophy, "Saint Ludwig" as Daniel Dennett called him 15 years ago, the philosopher's bag of tricks consists of logic and conceptual analysis. The thinker's duty then is to gain clarity and treat language disorders. Baldwin's Afro-American thinking stands in opposition to this 'leave everything as it is thinking'' because, in the words of Charles Mills, "it is a thinking that has evolved in resistance to oppression." [1] The social conditions of Baldwin and his heritage left no room for thinking that merely *depicts* the world and does not *change* it. "Baldwin [...], rose from the nation's largest center of concentrated urban poverty, from its most exploited racial group of people," writes Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò in a biographical passage about Baldwin.[2] Contrast this with the youth of Wittgenstein, who grew up in one of the richest families in Europe (his father was a successful industrialist) and was allowed to study at the prestigious University of Cambridge. Although he later renounced his wealth for ascetic reasons and must have felt anything but free as an alleged homosexual in the England and Austria of 1900-50, this contrast shows that the racial burdens of Black thought necessitate the emergence of certain insights, while white thinking has the privilege of thinking about the world 'objectively' and distanced from political urgency, without the freedom of the thinker himself being at stake. That the freedom to be able to philosophize is not reserved for everyone

[1] Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
[2] Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 16.

should not have to be seen as something controversial; after all, philosophizing has since ancient times been something reserved for those who have the time, physical self-determination and mental space to do so. The ardent practical problems Baldwin faced did not permit such distanced reflection. Unlike Wittgenstein's task of modifying everyday language for the sake of logic, Baldwin's task for the thinker was to confront the injustices of life at all costs: "to examine society and try to change it and to fight it–at no matter what risk."[1]

What this contradiction points to is *not* that Wittgenstein did not understand what thinking amounts to, but that he overlooked the situatedness of his thinking in a social context. We can give Wittgenstein credit for the distinction he makes between how sentences belonging to science and sentences belonging to ethics relate to the world. The former relationship is factual and the latter appreciative, as Amartya Sen explains this distinction. [2] However, it is of course something completely different to make a sentence's *relation* to the world coincide with what a sentence is *capable of bringing about* in the world. Both descriptive and normative sentences can bring about moral changes in the world by the way they are used. If a linguistic confusion is cleared up, the world can indeed be looked *at* differently – an illusion is undone – but at the same time one obtains new possibilities of dealing *with* the world, rather than the world remaining 'as it is'. Baldwin was steeped in how social context provides a mold for thinking: his entire oeuvre is dedicated to a rude awakening of white ignorance. Yet in my view, the lesson is not seeing Wittgenstein to be at fault. but that logical analysis and fighting practical injustice complement each other, as means and ends, as modern political philosophers like Iris Marion Young or Olúfémi Táíwò have already duly realized. For instance, when Táíwò refers to the debate between Baldwin and William F. Buckley and quotes Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* "*I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all*."[3], he makes it clear that today's injustices – the scope of political philosophy's task – are inextricably linked to history, but that the capacity to speak, write and read empower each of us to create new ethical moments. Everyone is more than their origin and randomness of will, and everyone is capable of using the moral power of meaning to examine and change society.

Besides Baldwin, decolonial thinkers also noted this ethic of meaning. Nigerian philosopher Uchenna Okeja wrote that the imposition of Western languages caused the displacement of African terms and their replacement with Western terms and that this was inherent to colonialism. In line with the celebrated Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, he argues that the imposition of European languages such as English and French killed conceptual distinctions inherent in the thinking of certain African cultures. The words of English and French, rooted in European cultural history and expressing the European conceptual framework, cast a shadow

[1] James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," p. 679.
[2] Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 40-41.
[3] Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*, p. 105.

over the nuances of African languages such as Twi, Luo or Yoruba and as such over the African conceptual framework itself.[1] Another aspect of the ethics of meaning, then, is that language use can *colonialize* the conceptual resources of a form of life; an application of words in which their ethical connotations clearly emerge.

Just as Baldwin pointed to the connection of the etymology of Black English with the past of slavery and the destructive power of a word like 'nigger,' which derives all its connotations from how it is used and has been used in the past, Okeja points to the consequences of the colonial expulsion of languages that had developed their own ways and conceptual nuances for articulating the world. To recall again Calvino's Mr Palomar: this is where moral relations arising from ways of describing the world are lost.

Discussion and objections

In the argumentation developed in the reviewing of Baldwin's and Wittgenstein's writings, I have been largely critical of the neutralizing analytics of Wittgenstein's views and instead I favored Baldwin's politicized approach to meaning. Calvino's metaphorical supplements enabled me to entangle the two discourses and to home in on the shortcomings of a thinking that sees language as something that 'leaves everything as it is' rather than as a vehicle of morality that is imbued with relations of power. However, objections can be made to both my conclusions and line of argument. I will consider three of those objections in turn, replying to them briefly.

Methodological infeasibility. A hypothetical interlocuter could object to the feasibility of the comparison. Baldwin's novels relate dimensions of African-American and autobiographical experience to the reader and his essays are oriented to concrete political goals. It can be argued that this differs too strongly from Wittgenstein's aphoristic (Philosophical Investigations) and propositional (Tractatus)

work to be adequately compared and that ultimately, criticizing Wittgenstein based on such a comparison amounts to cherry-picking disagreements. To this I would respond that the range of concepts Wittgenstein's work covers is monumental (undiscussed here are at least: psychological categories, scientific inquiry, rule following etc.). However, these are not unrelated in the 'framework' of thought that can be discerned in his writings based upon the most important concepts of language, world, meaning and thought itself, which I centralized in this study. Next to that, it can be argued that literature and 'practi- cal' essays such as Baldwin's present existential possibilities and normative evaluation of actualities respectively. I argued the import of Wittgenstein's views on language and world for language use cannot but be normative and related to ethics. This argument in itself can be viewed as not arising from a previous relation with the comparison; it is itself a grounding

[1] Uchenna Okeja, *Deliberative agency: a study in modern African philosophy,* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2022), p. 108.

reason for the comparison's feasibility. Prior theoretical views with normative consequences shape subsequent existential possible lives and normative evaluation of actual lives. Hence I reject the argument against the feasibility of the comparison.

Inconclusiveness of evidence. Empirically, it can be objected that there is too little philological evidence for a philosophy of language in Baldwin's oeuvre for me to develop it. This counterargument states that my interpretation of Baldwin's work as containing a political philosophy of language is brittle because Baldwin nowhere provides a fully theoretical exposition of the ideas I attribute to hum. Contra this view, I argue the objection is misguided for three reasons. First of all, it foregoes that Wittgenstein's body of work is even more fragmented, unfinished and structured like separate notes than Baldwin's work is and this has not stopped anybody from deeming it of immense philosophical value and a suitable object for scholarly attentions. Statements, short essays and novels of ideas can likewise function as starting points for philosophical reflection. Secondly, writing separate texts throughout a human life means fixing thoughts in differing states of mind, political contexts of expression and momentary be- liefs. It takes an interpreter to distill more holistic ideas of philosophical value from those texts and put them to another conceptual use, such as comparing them with other ideas. Thirdly, one can counter the objection with a question: when is a philosophy of language complete, then? This question admits of only equivocal answers. The point is that Baldwin's oeuvre presents us with more than enough thought provoking statements on thinking, language, duty and being human to merit including those views. On a methodological closing note, I agree with Iris Marion Young that philosophical ideas can be used as tools in a toolbox, which is not necessarily taking ideas out of context, but does preclude some freedom in synthesizing the ideas of different authors under an umbrella of one's own to put a concept or insight to a specific use (Young, 1990, p. 8). Ironically, this idea seems to be quasi-reminiscent of the Wittgen- steinian view of words as tools, which have different meanings/use values with respect to the different uses the words/tools are put to (PI, §11).

Wittgenstein's vengeance. One can object against the impossibility of ethically neutral language use and argue that my argument for the inextricability of ethical relations from the use of language has it backwards. Language can be and often is charged with moral values, but this is actually a special deviation from the more general, fundamentally neutral construction that is language. Tempting as it may seem to step back into the Tractatus-paradigm, we have to remain, like Mr Palomar came to realize, post-Wittgensteinian in how fundamental we deem use contexts to be to the nature of language. Politics and the values embedded into life forms interacting with one another precede speech and writing and hence to use language is to change something in the existence of life forms' worlds. Contrary to the objection, neutral language use is not the norm but the exception. Instead, language that does not change anything, that is depoliticized to the point of no longer affecting

life, can only be an artifice constructed for the specific purpose of neutrality. But the masquerading project of doing so, itself cannot escape to have ethical implications.

Directions for future work that targets further elucidation of the connections and contrasts between Baldwin's and Wittgenstein's oeuvres include a more thorough deepening of the post- or decolonial angle of the comparison and/or further development of the linguistic component of the comparison. Examples of the former would be examining the ideas on the diffusion of power into language use in the works of postcolonial literary and scholarly figures such as Kwasi Wiredu (Wiredu, 2002) and Édou- ard Glissant (Glissant, 1990/1997). Doing so could shed light on questions that regard other historical and cultural contexts such as 'How does the influence of domination on language use differ in other colonial and linguistic contexts than Baldwin's (i.e. the Caribbean (creole languages) or Sub-Saharan Africa (French and English imposition))?' or 'What further implications of the contrast Baldwin/Witt- genstein can be discerned for the project of conceptual decolonization?' Examples of the latter could

include, firstly, other perspectives from the philosophy of language and linguistic theory, focusing, among others on questions like 'How can the colonial/racial/moral value-ladenness of expressions be determined?' Secondly, since in this study I have been largely critical of Wittgenstein's ideas, retaliating arguments to the propositions in this essay based on interpretations of Wittgenstein's work can be de-veloped. At the intersection of both directions lie several currents in Wittgensteinian feminism that com- bine political, contextual analyses with philosophical linguistics.

Conclusion

A discussion between Baldwin and Wittgenstein on the nature of language may never have taken place, but I have illustrated how rich the contrast between their work is. The central implication of all this is that language is never neutral. Meaning is always ethically situated because it emerges from the human connections between saying and doing: what one actually does by saying something. I have shown that here Baldwin is closely related to the later Wittgenstein, because he situates meaning in the use of language. However, Wittgenstein did not politicize this, but Baldwin did so from the outset. I do not mean to suggest that Wittgenstein did not see the potential of his philosophical position, but in Baldwin's work, the maxim that the meaning of language is derived from the context of language use is implemented in such a way that it elucidates that every piece of human writing and speech takes place in an ethical context: a politico-historical position in which what is said is constituted by what one is silent about. Silence can be virtuous or negligent, negligent because thinking is also already a moral vehicle language. Some thoughts should be spoken but are not. That is what constitutes negligent silence. The treatment of language use within the framework of Wittgenstein's 'leaves everything as it is' conception of thought thus seems itself to fall prey to a linguistic confusion: *the obliteration of the ethical charge from a situation* by considering

word-use to be a neutral vehicle. I now can only surmise this: nothing could be further from the truth. Baldwin's writings made me understand why no word leaves something as it is.

References

[1] Baldwin, J. (1962). Another Country. Penguin Books.
[2] Baldwin, J. (1968). Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Penguin Books
[3] Baldwin, J. (1974). If Beale Street Could Talk. Penguin Books.
[4] Baldwin, J. (1979). Just Above My Head. Micheal Joseph.
[5] Baldwin, J. (1998). A Talk to Teachers. In T. Morrison (Ed.) Collected Essays (pp. 678-686). The Li- brary of America.
[6] Baldwin, J. (1998). Color. In T. Morrison (Ed.) Collected Essays (pp. 673-677). The Library of America. (Original work published in 1962)
[7] Baldwin, J. (1998). If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is? In T. Morrison (Ed.)
[8] Collected Essays (pp. 780-783). The Library of America. (Original work published in 1979) Baldwin, J. (1998). No Name in the Street. In T. Morrison (Ed.) Collected Essays (pp. 349-476). The Library of America. (Original work published in 1972)
[9] Baldwin, J. (1998). The Price of the Ticket. In T. Morrison (Ed.) Collected Essays (pp. 830-842). The Library of America. (Original work published in 1985)
[10] Baldwin, J. (1998). The White Man's Guilt. In T. Morrison (Ed.) Collected Essays (pp. 722-725). The Library of America. (Original work published in 1965)
[11] Borges, J. L. (1998). Collected Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges (A. Hurley, Trans.). The Pinguin Press. (Original work published in 1974)
[12] Calvino, I. (1974). Invisible Cities (W. Weaver, Trans.). Harcourt & Brace Company. (Original work published in 1972)
[13] Calvino, I. (1993). Six Memos for the Next Millennium (P. Creagh, Trans.). Harvard University Press. (Original work published in 1988)
[14] Calvino, I. (1999). Mr Palomar (W. Weaver, Trans.). Random House. (Original work published in 1983) Calvino, I. (2023). The Written World and the Unwritten World. In The Written World and the Unwrit- ten World: Collected Non-fiction (A. Goldstein, Trans.) (pp. 119-130). Penguin Books. (Original work published in 1982)
[15] Glissant, É. (1997). Poetics of Relation (B. Wing, Trans.). The University of Michigan Press. (Original work published in 1990)
[16] Hacker, P. M. S. (1996). Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-century Analytic Philosophy. Blackwell Pub- lishers.
[17] Mills, C. W. (1998). Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race. Cornell University Press. Mills, C. W. (2014). White Time: The Chronic Injustice of Ideal Theory. Du Bois Review 11 (1), 27-42. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X14000022.

[18] Okeja, U. (2022). Deliberative agency: a study in modern African philosophy. Indiana University Press.
[19] hommes] (J. Noorman, Trans.). Atlas Contact. (Original work published 2021) Sen, A. (2009). The Idea of Justice. Harvard University Press.
[20] Táíwò, O. O. (2022). Reconsidering Reparations. Oxford University Press, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197508893.001.0001.
[21] Wiredu, K. (2002). Conceptual decolonization as an imperative in contemporary African philosophy: some personal reflections. Rue Descartes 36 (2), 53-64. https://doi.org/10.3917/rdes.036.0053.
[22] Wittgenstein, L. (1976). Filosofische onderzoekingen (H. W. Bakx, Trans.). Boom. (Original work pub- lished 1953)
[23] Wittgenstein, L. (1995). Knipsels (W. Oranje, Trans.). Boom. (Original work published 1967)
[24] Wittgenstein, L. (1971). Notebooks 1914-1916. 2nd edition. G. H. von Wright & G. E. M. Anscombe (Eds.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1961)
[25] Wittgenstein, L. (1977). Over zekerheid (S. Terwee, Trans.). Boom. (Original work published 1969) Wittgenstein, L. (2006). Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (W.F. Hermans, Trans.) Athenaeum—Polak & Van Gennep. (Original work published 1921)
[26] Young, I. M. (1990). Justice and the Politics of Difference. Princeton University Press.