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*Who's Calling Wittgenstein a Pragmatist?*

*Abstract.* In this paper, I focus on the debate that surrounds “pragmatic” interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein. By this, I mean the debate between those who read Wittgenstein as a pragmatist or as having pragmatic affinities and those who object to this reading. In particular, drawing on Hilary Putnam’s lecture “Was Wittgenstein a Pragmatist?” and Stanley Cavell’s response “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?,” I will spell out the similarities seen between Wittgenstein and pragmatism as well as the divergences emphasized between the two. I will argue that the teasing out of the similarities *and* the teasing out of the differences is important to a) having a clearer understanding of both Wittgenstein and pragmatism; b) showing elements that make twentieth century philosophy unique; and c) shedding light on where philosophy is now, what issues and questions are being raised, and what possible solutions and answers are being offered.

*Introduction*

There is some irony to the fact that the content of this paper will deal with a controversy surrounding the application of labels to a philosopher who displayed the root of many philosophical disputes to be disputes over labels and ways of speaking. The truth of this philosopher’s insight is especially apparent in twentieth century philosophy, as this century has largely been a breaking away from the philosophical positions and labels that have marked philosophy since Descartes and a forging of new positions and, hence, new labels. The result of forging these new philosophical territories has been a philosophical tendency to dispute the interpretation of past philosophies in negotiating boundaries.

In this paper, I will be focusing on the debate that surrounds “pragmatic” interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein. By this, I mean the debate between those who read Wittgenstein as a pragmatist or as having pragmatic affinities and those who object to this reading. In particular, drawing on Hilary Putnam’s lecture “Was Wittgenstein a Pragmatist?”<sup>1</sup> and Stanley Cavell’s response “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?”<sup>2</sup> I will spell out the similarities seen between Wittgenstein and pragmatism as well as the divergences emphasized between the two. I will argue that the teasing out of the similarities *and* the teasing out of the differences is important to a) having a clearer understanding of both Wittgenstein and pragmatism; b) showing elements that make twentieth century philosophy unique; and c) shedding light on where philosophy is now, what issues and questions are being raised, and what possible solutions and answers are being offered.

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1 Putnam (1995).

2 Cavell (1998).

*Was Wittgenstein a Pragmatist?*

Hilary Putnam begins his lecture, and I will begin my discussion of his lecture, by stressing that this question and his title, “Was Wittgenstein a Pragmatist?,” is “in a way” misleading.<sup>3</sup> He clarifies the fact (and repeats it in his concluding remarks) that his purpose is only to show the shared background and insights of Wittgenstein, Kant, and the pragmatists. Putnam’s approach to this question aims to place what he takes as pragmatism’s central insights in philosophical and historical context, showing continuity, convergence and development of these insights over time. I stress this aim, because it is crucial to understanding Putnam’s argument (and Stanley Cavell’s response). Putnam’s intention is not to reduce Wittgenstein to an ‘-ism’ of any kind, including pragmatism. One almost must skip to the end of Putnam’s lecture to most clearly understand its beginning and purpose. There, he clearly and explicitly states that, although Wittgenstein was *not* a “pragmatist,” he did share a common Kantian heritage and at least one common insight with them.<sup>4</sup>

Putnam claims there are two philosophical seeds found in Kant that sprout when placed in the soils of pragmatist and Wittgensteinian philosophy. The first is the observation that we bring conceptual biases and interests to our descriptions of the world.<sup>5</sup> The second is Kant’s ‘incipient pluralism’, which recognizes that we have and use various interactive and interdependent images of the world.<sup>6</sup>

Both of these themes will look significantly different in their ripened form. In the first case, although Wittgenstein carries over Kant’s observation that our descriptions carry with them conceptual ‘baggage’, he adamantly rejects the notion of description without such “baggage”.<sup>7</sup> The idea of a description of the world without conceptual biases would require the invention of a language independent of our purposes for language, something that is neither intelligible nor fathomable. As long as language is invented and used for particular human purposes (i.e. as long as humans use language), our concepts will be influenced by those purposes and so will our descriptions.

In the second theme carried over from Kant, Wittgenstein and the pragmatists take up and affirm that we use various vocabularies in our interaction with the world, but they reject Kant’s priority given to scientific images and vocabularies as having privileged access to true descriptions and knowledge claims.<sup>8</sup> Science, its images, and its vocabulary hold no special access to the world over less sophisticated, ‘primitive’, and pre-scientific images such as religion, art and morality. While the pragmatists might overtly state this point, Wittgenstein, in his typically “deflationary” tone, refuses to turn his observations into theses and only states the obvious—that our ethical words also have uses in language.<sup>9</sup>

Putnam’s point in raising these issues is multiple. For one, he is rejecting the commonly held interpretation of Wittgenstein as ‘the end of philosophy’: the picture that philosophy is a disease, and Wittgenstein the cure.<sup>10</sup> Second, he wants to show that Wittgenstein is instead trying to convert us from a bad way of looking at things to a better way of seeing things,<sup>11</sup>

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3 Putnam (1995:27).

4 Ibid., 52.

5 Ibid., 28-29.

6 Ibid., 30.

7 Ibid., 29.

8 Ibid., 31.

9 Ibid., 41.

10 Ibid., 27, 31.

11 Ibid., 27.

something Wittgenstein explicitly confesses, as reported in his "Lectures on Aesthetics".<sup>12</sup> Third, Putnam wants to shed light on what and how Wittgenstein wants us to see differently. And, lastly, he wants to make explicit a common Kantian heritage shared by both the pragmatists and Wittgenstein and shared reactions to that heritage (at least in some respects).

Moving to the more controversial part of the lecture, Putnam moves to an insight he sees brought over from Kant and shared by both the pragmatists and Wittgenstein: 'the primacy of practical reason'. In Kant, this takes the form of recognizing that we cannot justify our knowledge (be it scientific or moral) by beginning with a priori reasoning but only by beginning with our practical reason.<sup>13</sup> As Putnam says elsewhere, the primacy of practical reason is recognizing that what is indispensable to our practices is more primary than what our theories can justify.<sup>14</sup> This is not to say, however, that whatever is indispensable to our practices becomes necessarily good, true or right; it only means that those practices should be taken into account. If something is indispensable to our practices and all the arguments against it fail, these combined make a better argument for that something than an argument against it that claims, since we do not have a justification for it, it cannot be. In short, philosophy must begin with taking our practices seriously and not with trying to construct 'a theory of everything'.<sup>15</sup>

Putnam's extension of this to Wittgenstein consists in reading Wittgenstein to be saying that the possibility of understanding a form of life, without participating in its practices, is limited.<sup>16</sup> As long as the value and purpose of a form of life can only be stated in the language of that form of life, philosophy cannot provide some rule or theory to judge it, without participating in its practices or, at least, *some* of its practices. For Wittgenstein, the root of moral criticism must be shared practices (including shared practices of criticism itself) and not some theory of the Good.<sup>17</sup> For Dewey, this same basic idea appears in his view that one purpose for philosophy should be to criticize the beliefs, customs, policies, institutions of a culture but only through the other shared beliefs, customs, policies and institutions of such culture.

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12 Wittgenstein (1966:27-8). He is reported as saying: "What I'm doing is also persuasion....I am saying 'I don't want you to look at it like that.'" The footnote to that, the alternative report, is: "I am saying I want you to look at the thing in a different way". Also, "I am in a sense making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another. I am honestly disgusted with the other". This seems to me further support that there is no "end" to philosophy where philosophy is understood as a discipline. I interpret Wittgenstein (1958:§133) to mean that philosophical questions must have stopping points (i.e. conceivable answers), something the metaphysical and epistemological projects of traditional philosophy lacked, and it is this type of project to which he is an end. He generalizes a few passages later in his lecture: "How much we are doing is changing the style of thinking and how much I'm doing is changing the style of thinking....(Much of what we are doing is a question of changing the style of thinking.)" I can only assume by "we" he means philosophers and by "what we are doing" he means philosophy. This suggests to me that Wittgenstein did hold a "constructive" view for philosophy; however, as in the case with all his other views, he does not state it as or in the form of a thesis but rather lets his observations stand for themselves. I want to make clear however that, considering his later philosophy as a whole, I do not think that these remarks on persuasion can be interpreted without mentioning that persuasion: a) must occur within a shared form of life or at least with some shared forms, b) that it does not mean there is no better or worse way of viewing things, nor c) that it means there are no external sources from which we can negotiate varying perspectives.

13 Wittgenstein (1966:42-3).

14 See Putnam (1994).

15 Putnam (1995:44).

16 *Ibid.*, 42.

17 See Wittgenstein (1969:§608-612).

*What's the Use of Calling Wittgenstein a Pragmatist?*

Cavell, in his article "What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?," wants to ask what is at stake in drawing the similarities between Wittgenstein and the pragmatists (in particular Dewey) and what is at stake in stressing the limitations of the comparison. Cavell begins by quoting what he takes to be a typical and representative passage of Dewey: "scientific method is the only authentic means at our command for getting at the significance of our everyday experiences of the world in which we live".<sup>18</sup> Cavell, by taking this as representative of Dewey's philosophy, thereby considers Dewey's philosophy lacking in what I shall call the moral perfectionist and existential aspects which Cavell finds in the philosophy of Emerson and Wittgenstein. Cavell claims that the privileged status that Dewey grants to the method of science is incompatible with an Emersonian emphasis on concepts such as mourning, objectivity and the human subject.<sup>19</sup> Cavell finds Dewey's primacy of science and its method inadequate to the "work," which Emerson (and Wittgenstein) considered necessary for philosophy to access the significance of our experiences, especially experiences such as mourning or skepticism (understood as Cavell's sense of 'skepticism').

For Wittgenstein more specifically, Cavell objects to Putnam's confidence that Wittgenstein, alongside the pragmatists, grants 'a primacy of practice'.<sup>20</sup> Cavell takes several passages—one from *Philosophical Investigations* (§217)<sup>21</sup> and a set from *On Certainty* (§422, §89)<sup>22</sup>—that he claims are used to justify Wittgenstein's affinities with pragmatism.<sup>23</sup> Cavell interprets these passages as neither invoking practice nor granting a centrality to practical effects; rather, according to him, they mean that, oftentimes, we are left with patience, waiting, and inaction as our only options.<sup>24</sup> At times, according to Cavell's Wittgenstein, our practices run short, and we are impotent to take action.

Cavell considers the significance of these passages to be Wittgenstein's struggle "with the threat of skepticism," a threat, he notices, Dewey and James refuse to take seriously (though James less than Dewey).<sup>25</sup> Wittgenstein, according to Cavell, treats skepticism as a "necessary consequence" of speech and coincident with being human,<sup>26</sup> while the pragmatists, at best, treat it as a temperament found in certain personality types or, at worst, do not take it seriously at all.<sup>27</sup>

Cavell finds in Wittgenstein an important distinction between a time for practice and a time for patience, between action and passion, between 'massive unintelligence' and "general despair," between the call for political change and the necessity of suffering,<sup>28</sup> and ultimately between the role of philosophy found in Emerson and Wittgenstein and that found in Deweyan pragmatism. Cavell's fear is that by collapsing Wittgenstein and Emerson's philosophy into Dewey's, a philosophy, on Cavell's reading, oriented toward the scientific method and focused on political and democratic progress, we will lose what he con-

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18 Qtd. in Cavell (1998:73).

19 Ibid., 74.

20 Ibid., 76.

21 Wittgenstein (1958:§217).

22 Wittgenstein (1969:§422, §89).

23 Although Putnam, his 'straw man', does not use any of those passages and Cavell never mentions nor cites who does.

24 Cavell (1998:76-7).

25 Ibid., 77-8.

26 Ibid., 78.

27 Ibid., 77-8.

28 Ibid., 77-80.

siders to be of utmost importance in philosophy. What we will lose is the necessity of individual self-examination and individual growth, of struggling with one's self and allowing one's self to be changed and transformed by and through philosophy. Cavell fears that what he finds unique in the role of philosophy cannot be captured by Dewey's call to apply the scientific method to our political, social, and economic lives, because it leaves out wrestling with existential questions, which requires suffering and patience and ultimately the striving toward moral perfection.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Negotiating Between the Two Questions*

My explication of the two sides should at least hint at a problem here: mainly, that there is no obvious conflict. It would seem that we again have a case of philosophers talking past each other, or, to be fair, (since Putnam does not have a written response) our case is one of Cavell talking past Putnam. This becomes apparent by the fact that Cavell raises Putnam's application of the primacy of practice yet does not directly address Putnam's argument. The reason for this, it seems to me, is that they are not even talking about the same thing here (even if they share common terminology). In Putnam's use of 'the primacy of practice', he is opposing 'practice' to abstract theorizing and a priori justifications; Cavell, in his use, is opposing 'practice' to inaction, patience, and reflection. But Putnam's use is far broader than Cavell understands it to be. By practice, Putnam can only mean our human practices, which entails just as much our silence, patience and reflections as it does forging ahead and taking action. Putnam's claim is far less controversial than Cavell's construal of it; Putnam's claim that both Wittgenstein and the pragmatists share the view that our reflections and theorizing should take our practices—be they political, social, cultural, economic, scientific, or moral—seriously is not one to which I think Cavell would object.

However, that there are not genuine disagreements in this case of "the primacy of practice" is not to say that there are not some serious difficulties elsewhere. The difficulty that I want to mention here is Cavell disregarding aspects of Dewey's philosophy in order to make his point (but, as I will explain further, this is not fatal to what I take to be Cavell's key point). While Dewey does think that science is the best model we actually have for experimental application of intelligent inquiry to problematic situations, he does *not* think that it is the exclusive method, something Cavell outrightly allows the reader to believe by his choice (and de-contextualization) of Dewey's quote about '*the only authentic means*' of understanding the significance of our experiences. Dewey does not think science has the supreme and ultimate method; rather, he believes the scientific method provides a useful model of success, a paradigm, from which we can draw insights (i.e. experimentalism, application of intelligence to problems) and apply them to other areas of our lives. Cavell's portrayal of Dewey misses that Dewey was not afraid of criticizing science or of pointing out its shortcomings, nor does he think it appropriate to apply science to all experience.

Regardless, Cavell's key point—that there is a sense that, on the matter of science, Wittgenstein, on the one hand, and Dewey and the pragmatists, on the other, do part company—is unaffected by this misrepresentation. I interpret Wittgenstein, from many of the remarks made in his journals and collected as *Culture and Value*,<sup>30</sup> to have considered any faith in progress, not just Enlightenment faith in inevitable progress, a hidden remnant of scientism in Western culture. While Cavell might be wrong about Dewey's idealization of

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-80.

<sup>30</sup> Wittgenstein (1980).

the scientific method, I think that Wittgenstein would have objected to Dewey and the pragmatists' idealization of progress in general. Wittgenstein was a deeply pessimistic thinker, even if this does not show in his published philosophical writings. Nevertheless, he deeply despaired of his age, and, in part, because everywhere there was "progress," he saw decline.<sup>31</sup>

This pessimism, I find, incompatible with, and contrary to, the ameliorism of the pragmatists. While Dewey did not think progress inevitable, he suggested and probably believed that there is good reason for optimism, as long as we persist with the application of critical intelligence. However, Dewey was not willing to examine the limitations of applying his methods to problematic situations, a failure to explore what Cornel West has called the "tragic". Cavell has identified a difference here, but it is not so much based on that Dewey idealizes the scientific method as much as that he idealizes the notion of progress taken from science.

In order to make his point, I claim, Cavell also downplays the moral aspect of Dewey's philosophy for the political aspect. For Cavell's opposition to work, Dewey must be painted as concerned exclusively with political and social action, and not with the moral development of the individual. In short, Cavell must ignore Dewey's *Ethics* and, in particular, the part in which he argues that any progress (social, political, economic, etc.) is not possible without human flourishing, without fulfillment of *individuals'* powers and capacities.<sup>32</sup>For Dewey, a philosophy concerned with political and social reform does not make sense without equal concern for individual human flourishing, a position compatible with Wittgenstein and Emerson's moral perfectionism. For Dewey, these things are deeply interconnected and in a dialectical relationship; political and social progress occurs through individual flourishing and, in turn, individuals are the agents of social and political progress.

#### *Cavell's Central Challenge*

Despite difficulties with his description of Dewey, Cavell nonetheless correctly identifies a key difference between Wittgenstein and Emerson, on the one hand, and Dewey, on the other: that there is a deep tension between philosophy as an individual examination of oneself and as a politically engaged method for progress. While Wittgenstein and Dewey might have shared a scorn for philosophy as metaphysics and they might have shared the primacy of practice, Dewey *does emphasize* political practice, and Wittgenstein *does emphasize* (personal) moral practice. And while Putnam for his purposes stresses the commonality, Cavell sees a tension in this difference that he does not want glossed over.

The difference is between the stressing of philosophy as political/cultural criticism and as an existential/moral exercise, a working on oneself. The tension implicates the perennial pull between the individual and community. Wittgenstein's (and Emerson's) focus is on the moral and existential suffering that necessarily accompanies human existence; and philoso-

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31 See Wittgenstein (1980:4): "if anyone should think he has solved the problem of life and feel like telling himself that everything is quite easy now, he can see that he is wrong just by recalling that there was a time when this 'solution' had not been discovered; but it must have been possible to live then too and the solution which has now been discovered seems fortuitous in relation to how things were then". "Our civilization is characterized by the word 'progress'. Progress is its form rather than making progress being one of its features" (Ibid., 7). "It isn't absurd, e.g., to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end for humanity; that the idea of great progress is a delusion, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge and that mankind, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means obvious that this is not how things are" (Ibid., 56).

32 See Dewey (1908: 277-80).

phy, for them, is centrally a method to help individuals cope with this. This suffering, often-times, requires inaction, if action is understood as changing one's circumstances; instead, this kind of suffering demands a working on oneself, a changing of one's attitude.<sup>33</sup> Dewey's focus, however, is on an entirely different kind of suffering: suffering that inhibits personal change and growth; suffering caused by oppression, torture and inequality; suffering that does not have its roots necessarily in the iron human predicament but in human and, therefore, malleable socio-economic institutions; suffering which must be removed *before* there is any hope or possibility of 'working on oneself' or changing one's attitude.

While Wittgenstein largely used philosophy as an internalized working on the self, Dewey used it to change his external surroundings. Cavell's objection is that if philosophy is 'merely' a tool for the eradication of social, political, and economic injustices, philosophy could just as easily be replaced by political science departments, the legal profession, or the Peace Corps for that matter.<sup>34</sup> What I think Cavell fails to recognize, however, is that philosophy does not have to have a singular aim and that there is nothing, philosophically, incompatible with Dewey's and Wittgenstein's emphasis on different aims. The incompatibility lies not in pitting Dewey's philosophy against Wittgenstein's, as nothing philosophically requires choosing between them; rather, philosophically, as probably all those inspired by the pragmatist spirit (from at least William James to Cornel West) have pointed out, to some degree, the two aims go hand in hand. However, the tension arises in individuals' lives: the tug-of-war between political injustice and the individual struggle toward human flourishing, between social progress and a person's own moral progress, between working on communal improvement and working on self-improvement, between things we can control and change and things to which we must submit and accept. Where Cavell could have strengthened the key insight of his paper is not by pitting the two philosophies against each other but by pitting the two *lives* against each other. In theory, there does not seem to be a problem between our political commitments and our existential commitments. But, if you look at the lives of these philosophers—of Wittgenstein and Emerson, of James and Dewey—we see in all of them this tension and conflict arise.

Emerson often felt riddled by the conflict between, on the one side, his desire for action and desire to be an agent in social change and, on the other, his contemplative and solitary temperament.<sup>35</sup> William James as well felt the tension, and he tended toward the individual aspect. But the radical contrast can be found in comparing the life of Dewey to the life of Wittgenstein, and I believe this makes Cavell's point stronger than his comparison between Wittgenstein and Emerson's philosophies and a simplified Deweyan philosophy.

Dewey certainly felt the conflict between his individual morality and his responsibility to social and political reform. Yet, he consistently chose his commitments to the community, even, one could argue, at the cost of his personal morality in some cases. His decision to temper his views or to steer away from radical issues,<sup>36</sup> viewed from the standpoint of Wittgenstein's moral perfectionism, required an unacceptable compromise. On the other hand, Wittgenstein's personal integrity, including an almost inhuman refusal to compro-

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33 See Wittgenstein (1980:16, 53): "Working in philosophy—like work in architecture in many respects—is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things" and "If life is hard to bear we think of a change in our circumstances. But the most important and effective change, a change in our own attitude, hardly even occurs to us, and the resolution to take such a step is very difficult for us".

34 Cavell (1998:80).

35 See West (1989:21-5).

36 I am thinking here of his decision to not go ahead with his journalist project, Thought News, and his avoiding Marxism because it was controversial in mainstream academic and intellectual circles. See West (1989:81, 108).

mise, is central to understanding his moral search for purity as well as his philosophical search for clarity.

Wittgenstein's political engagements in his life show more than anything else his difference from Dewey. I would argue that Wittgenstein refused to use philosophy in any political way, beyond the role it played in guiding his own political activities and decisions. It is those activities and decisions to which I now want to turn in order to reveal just how deep the contrast between him and Dewey runs. Three biographical incidences illustrate this point. The first is Wittgenstein's role in World War I. Wittgenstein demanded to fight at the front and at the most dangerous post despite encouragement from military officials that he would better serve the army behind the lines. This incident shows a view of political commitment that, above all, requires solidarity of position and circumstance, not just solidarity of views and causes. The second is Wittgenstein's decision, at the end of the war, to renounce his inheritance, not giving it to the poor or a charitable cause (other than contributing minimal amounts of it to several artists), but to his already abundantly wealthy relatives. This decision, at a minimum, affirms my interpretation that socially and politically he believed in activism through solidarity. In a more extreme interpretation of the decision, this act suggests that Wittgenstein viewed material possessions as corrupt and felt that he would not be aiding the poor by distributing his wealth to them. This hints at a view of (economic) suffering as either inevitable, not his responsibility, or unnecessary to alleviate. The final incident is Wittgenstein's attempt, later in his life, to immigrate to Stalinist Russia, which fell through precisely as a result of Wittgenstein's demand (and Russia's refusal) that he work on a collective once there (again, in solidarity with and along side the "down-trodden").

I believe that comparison of the two lives better highlights the central problem that Cavell sees with grouping Wittgenstein (and Emerson) as a pragmatist, but I also believe that this comparison raises one of the central issues with which pragmatism and neo-pragmatism wrestled with and is wrestling with still today. I think Wittgenstein and Dewey's personal philosophical views that guided their individual decisions are antithetical. Wittgenstein would probably consider Dewey lacking in courage, hypocritical, and compromised (if not worse).<sup>37</sup> Dewey would probably consider Wittgenstein politically naive, unrealistic, not living up to his full responsibilities, and, therefore, partially lacking the integrity so prized and valorized by him.

Thankfully, such extreme personalities only occur rarely and some balance can usually be struck in the life of the individual; however, the tension has been a ubiquitous one in philosophy, accompanying the similar question of philosophy as poetry and philosophy as science. That the situation will be remedied or the tension resolved ultimately is unlikely. As long as communities are made up of individuals, there will be conflicts between personal responsibility and communal responsibility, and the balance can only be worked out in the life of each individual within the context of his or her particular community.

But to bring us back to the "debate" between Putnam and Cavell, that there is no debate should be now obvious (at least, not with Putnam's use of Wittgenstein, and Cavell does not mention anyone else's). Putnam himself says Wittgenstein is no pragmatist, no neo-pragmatist. He certainly never claimed that Wittgenstein and Dewey shared agreement about everything, and he understands that each was a unique thinker and a unique character.

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<sup>37</sup> Wittgenstein's (unreasonable) disgust with intellectuals who were politically engaged in this manner is apparent when he wrote in his journal: "the people making speeches against producing the bomb are undoubtedly the scum of the intellectuals, but even that does not prove beyond question that what they abominate is to be welcomed." Wittgenstein (1980: 49).

If Putnam's point can be said to be about a shared insight, Cavell's point could be said to be about a shared game of tug-of-war but also about the difference in sides taken. But neither of these are incompatible with the other and, in fact, both properly understood help not only to clarify Wittgenstein's philosophy and the philosophy of pragmatism, but also together they show some unique insights and solutions offered to problems found in twentieth century philosophy.

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