

WITTGENSTEIN AND PROGRESS*

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Abstract: *In this article, I consider the concept of progress and Ludwig Wittgenstein's attitude towards it. The difficulty we face when attempting to unambiguously define and even understand such a phenomenon as progress gives rise to some confusion in our perceptions and analysis. Moreover, this difficulty may distort our understanding of certain philosophers' thoughts on progress. Given that Wittgenstein lived during a time of remarkable scientific discoveries, but also of tragic historical events, examining his thoughts on progress seems both intriguing and fruitful. The aim of this article is not to identify any specific stance that Wittgenstein articulated with regard to progress, but rather to attempt to demonstrate that today many of his ideas can be effectively utilised to better understand progress and its role.*

Keywords: *Wittgenstein, progress, conservatism.*

Introduction

Nowadays we hear a lot of talk about progress. Many areas of our lives, both public and private, are bound up with this concept. But what does the word 'progress' truly signify? This question is more pertinent today than ever before, and answering it requires careful consideration. I present my reflections on this issue in the first part of this article, where I also briefly outline the emergence and consolidation of today's progressive thinking paradigm. In the second part, I examine Ludwig Wittgenstein's thoughts on progress from two key perspectives: what he was specifically discussing when he addressed the topic of progress, and whether he was indeed so negatively disposed towards it. The third part contains opinions regarding Wittgenstein's political views, i.e. not the philosopher's own political views, but others' opinions of them, the careful examination of which provides us with a broader perspective on the issue of progress.

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This article does not aim to present a definitive account of Wittgenstein's stance on progress or of his socio-political views; neither do I present my own views on the latter. The purpose of this article is to take a closer look at the philosopher's judgements, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of his philosophy, as this should help us apply it more successfully in today's realities.

What do we know about progress?

Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer.

Maybe self-destruction is the answer.

Chuck Palahniuk *Fight Club*

Do you believe in progress?

I think most people would answer yes to this question, without a moment's hesitation. However, if I refuse to be satisfied with this answer and follow Socrates' example, by prompting my interlocutors to clarify exactly what they mean by progress, I will most likely hear that progress is improvement, optimisation, development, a forward movement. This is a quite common and thoroughly justified intuition – in Latin, progress is translated as “movement forward, development, success”. If we continue and aim for greater precision, when the discussion turns to what or whom this improvement concerns I will probably hear that it is the improvement of “everything”, “everyone”, or simply “our life”. Such responses and reasoning – although I must admit I have yet to test them in practice – seem to be along the lines of what the majority of people would accept without reflection. This makes the attempt to understand such a seemingly simple yet very mysterious phenomenon as progress all the more interesting. Thus, to reason about progress, or to at least say something sensible on this topic, it is necessary to define what I mean when I talk about progress. Starting from a general definition of progress as a movement forward, or directed development from a lower level to a higher one (i.e. complexity), we can conclude that it is above all a process. A process which, in itself as a phenomenon, i.e. in isolation, cannot exist (in the way that a chair can exist as an object of the material world, which can be considered, with all the necessary reservations, in isolation from this world). To understand anything about a particular process, we correlate it with this or that aspect of objective reality (or subjective reality – this issue is not fundamental in

the context of this reasoning and will not be considered in more detail). Therefore, to contemplate progress, we must first determine what we are speaking of in relation to progress, that is, we have to define the domain of reasoning. It would be peculiar to speak of the progress of everything: “everything” is such a broad concept that it could justifiably be equated to “nothing”.² Barbara Kotowa attempted to categorise the areas in which the concept of progress is applied – in her article “Cultural Images of the World: How is Moral Progress Possible?”. She distinguishes cognitive progress in science, (artistic-aesthetic) progress in art, and moral progress.³ Without directly addressing the content of this article now, I refer only to this categorisation, which I consider not only justified but indeed necessary when contemplating progress within the framework of today’s thinking paradigm.⁴

When we speak of progress today, we tend to have scientific and technological progress in mind; less frequently, we mean social progress (including cultural and/or civilisational progress as its variations); and we almost never refer to progress in art. By scientific and technological progress, we usually understand the development of technology, the accumulation and expansion of scientific knowledge. It is precisely in this sense that Wittgenstein used the word progress when he made a rather famous entry in his journals:

Our civilization is characterized by the word progress. Progress is its form, it is not one of its properties that it makes progress. Typically it constructs. Its activity is to construct a more and more complicated structure. And even clarity is only a means to this end & not an end in itself.

For me on the contrary clarity, transparency, is an end in itself.

MS 109 204: 6-7.11.1930⁵

² Alexander Piatigorsky, in a manner characteristic to him, often reiterated during his public lectures that the words “everything,” “always,” and “all” are detrimental to philosophical thought, and he prohibited their use by his students.

³ Barbara Kotowa, “Kulturowe obrazy świata: jak możliwy jest postęp moralny?”, *Filo-Sofija* 36 (1/2017), pp. 137-150.

⁴ Rupert Read addresses the necessity of altering this paradigm in “Wittgenstein and the Illusion of ‘Progress’: On Real Politics and Real Philosophy in a World of Technocracy”, a work to which I will return later.

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, edited by Georg Henrik von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, Oxford 1998, p. 9.

Rupert Read conducts an analysis of Wittgenstein's attitude towards progress, including this quote, and points out that: "Technological progress is simply what our society does. This is what Wittgenstein is saying. But that by no means implies that such progress is always to be welcomed."⁶ I shall return to Wittgenstein's stance on progress a bit later.

It is also necessary to draw attention to other issues. I have described progress as a process, but I often highlight a different characteristic, referring to progress as an idea. This implies that progress is not something we uncover as belonging immanently to this world, but rather something we bring into the world to structure it, describe it, and understand it. As an idea, progress is ontological, yet as a process it is epistemic. If we agree with this definition (and this is my position), then many interesting aspects arise in the consideration of progress: the relationship with our perception of time, the connection with worldviews (the cultural-religious aspect), anthropocentrism, scientism, internal contradictions as an idea and as a process, etc. (however, all these topics – that are certainly necessary for explaining and gaining a better understanding the nature of what we call progress today – fall beyond the scope of the present article).

When did we first begin to speak of progress? In terms of the concept that seems closest to our current understanding, progress appears – on this point the majority of scholars agree – in the Age of Enlightenment, specifically in France, and became entrenched after the French Revolution. Indeed, what could bolster enthusiasm and faith in the development of society towards ever greater perfection than the motto "Liberty. Equality. Fraternity"? Therefore it is hardly surprising that this idea was most fully developed in the works of the avant-garde thinkers of the revolution: Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot and Nicolas de Condorcet.

They were perhaps the first to articulate the idea that progressive development is primarily associated with Reason, and that it can continue indefinitely into the future.

Such is the object of the work I have undertaken; the result of which will be to show, from reasoning and from facts, that no bounds have been fixed to the improvement of the human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite; that the progress of this perfectibility, henceforth

⁶ Rupert Read, "Wittgenstein and the Illusion of 'Progress': On Real Politics and Real Philosophy in a World of Technocracy", *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 78 (2016), pp. 265-284.

above the control of every power that would impede it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has placed us. The course of this progress may doubtless be more or less rapid, but it can never be retrograde; [...]⁷.

This understanding of progress as a rational act of reason took root and became the precursor of today's scientific approach to progress. Around the same time, the awareness and study of history began to develop, and more importantly, history began to be perceived as a process moving from the past towards the future. The development of this consciousness led to the formation of the idea of historical progress in Hegel's philosophy, and subsequently in Marx's (historical materialism). What was in the past came to be seen as a rung on the ladder to the present, and the present as a rung on the path to the future (of course, in Hegel's philosophy this image is somewhat different, but the trend is broadly the same). In this way, the idea of progress as a societal process of development moving inevitably towards an ever-improving future took shape.

It goes without saying that, like many ideas, the idea of progress was divisive and gained opponents as well as proponents. Perhaps the most well-known opponent of the Enlightenment idea of progress was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is also worth remembering Georges Sorel, who was very sceptical of the ideas of the French Enlightenment *philosophes* and their fascination with reason and rationality. In his book *Illusions of Progress*, he wrote the following about Condorcet: "It would be impossible to herald in more enthusiastic terms the passage from literature to journalism, from science to the rationalism of the salons and debating societies, from original research to declamation."⁸

Intriguingly, Sorel recalls the thought of Blaise Pascal, a strategy which will also be characteristic of Wittgenstein: "But we must not confuse the scientific use of reason with what is usually called, rationalism. Pascal attacked the latter fraudulent practice mercilessly, not only because he was

⁷ Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, trans. M. Carey, available at <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/condorcet-outlines-of-an-historical-view-of-the-progress-of-the-human-mind>, accessed 07 november 2023.

⁸ Georges Sorel., *The Illusions of Progress*, translated by John and Charlotte Stanley, California, 1972, p. 24.

a Christian, but also because his mind could not admit pseudo-mathematical reasoning to be used for answering moral questions.”⁹

The rejection of the idea of progress remained unchanged throughout subsequent history and continues to be so in contemporary times. Alongside the proponents of progress, there are always its sceptics and opponents.¹⁰ Wittgenstein is also considered to be an opponent of progress.

Let us now make a slight digression and pose another question: towards what or where is progress directed? Again, a fairly common intuition is reflected in the answer “towards happiness”, whatever this rather vague statement means. However, this is neither necessary nor even evident:

Why shouldn't someone become desperately unhappy? It is one human possibility. As in 'Corinthian Bagatelle', this is one of the possible paths for the balls. And perhaps not even one of the rarest.

MS 138 9b: 25.1.1949¹¹

This is not merely an indication of the possibility of development, but rather what I consider to be of great importance: in one way or another, progress is today perceived as the idea of development towards something that should be better than what has been before and/or is at present. This also implies a certain continuity across generations, but this is entirely non-obvious and optional:

If someone prophesies that the generation to come will take up these problems & solve them that is usually a sort of wishful thinking, a way of excusing oneself for what one should have accomplished & hasn't. A father would like his son to achieve what he has not achieved so that the task he left unresolved should find a resolution nevertheless. But his son is faced with a new task. I mean: the wish that the task should not remain unfinished disguises itself as a prediction that it will be taken further by the next generation.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹⁰ Today, Steven Pinker is one of the most renowned advocates and promoters of the idea of progress. Yuval Noah Harari could be classified as a skeptic, while John Gray is more likely aligned with the opponents. It is worth noting that neither the terror which swiftly replaced the ideals of the French Revolution, nor the atrocities of the two World Wars from the beginning and middle of the 20th century, managed to alter the general paradigm of thinking about the progressive development of humanity, even among its skeptics and opponents.

¹¹ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 92.

Returning to the issue of the direction of progress, I would like to highlight a Marxist connotation that is still in circulation today: the liberation of people from the necessity of labour by providing them with an unconditional basic income, in order to create the conditions for their development as individuals. This idea reaches us “from the depths of the ages”, but its ominous connotations in today’s realities still seem to be poorly thought out, although Hannah Arendt addressed this issue in the mid-20th century:

The modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a laboring society. The fulfilment of the wish, therefore, like the fulfilment of wishes in fairy tales, comes at a moment when it can only be self-defeating. It is a society of laborers which is about to be liberated from the fetters of labor, and this society does no longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won [...] What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse.¹³

Nonetheless, we are not inclined to perceive any danger in the idea of progress. Perhaps we simply do not reflect on it with sufficient seriousness.

If we cast our gaze back to recent history, we observe that the relatively optimistic attitude towards the idea of progress prevalent in the 18th and 19th centuries, and even at the dawn of the 20th century, gave way to a more sombre and pessimistic disposition by the mid-20th century. Prominent figures such as Walter Benjamin,¹⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno,¹⁵ and Ludwig Wittgenstein, expressed their reservations and scepticism.

The truly apocalyptic view of the world is that things do *not* repeat themselves. It is not e.g. absurd to believe that the scientific & technological age is the beginning of the end for humanity, that the idea of Great Progress is a bedazzlement, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge &

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 46.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, 1998, pp. 4-5.

¹⁴ See the quote regarding Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* in Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

¹⁵ In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

that humanity, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means clear that this is not how things are.

MS 133 90: 7.1.1947¹⁶

It is crucial to remember that progress is also a process that we attribute to a specific area of our life. Attention must then be drawn to the context of the mid-20th century, when the pessimism of many thinkers of the time regarding scientific, technological, and moral progress was entirely justified. The faith placed by Kant in the Enlightenment and the maturity of humanity, as well as Turgot and Condorcet's belief in a future of endless, rational progress, stumbled through concentration camp barracks and was blinded by the nuclear explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹⁷

What did Wittgenstein think about progress?

I have already mentioned that in the discourse on this subject, Wittgenstein is considered to be one of the opponents of progress, which is not surprising given his notes on the issue. However, it is impossible to speak of progress in general or progress in everything, and each time we talk about progress, we mean – even if we are not fully aware of this ourselves – something specific: scientific and technical progress, moral progress, social progress. Perhaps we are even thinking of something very specific: progress in medicine, in child-rearing, or in space exploration. It is not enough, therefore, to say that Wittgenstein had a negative attitude towards progress; it is necessary to specify exactly what he might have meant by this.

It is no secret that as a person Wittgenstein was quite extraordinary, or even atypical, when compared to other philosophers, especially his contemporaries. Nowadays people tend to think that a fuller understanding of his philosophy can be gained through some consideration of his personality and way of life. Without delving deeper into this issue, I believe it is necessary to highlight Wittgenstein's idiosyncratic attitude towards religion, or rather towards faith, which in turn shaped his unique approach to ethics. Why is this important? Our ethics emerge from (and are shaped by) our worldview, and thus influence our behaviour. At the same time, our worldview is shaped by certain ideas, and our behaviour shapes our lives. Here, I refer to what the philosopher himself termed "forms of life" and

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 64.

¹⁷ This does not negate the idea of progress as a process, but highlights its various aspects and draws attention to progress as an idea.

“following a rule,” which are inextricably linked with “language games”. I believe that all the processes described above are not always – and it would probably be more accurate to say that they are very rarely – conscious and deliberate: “What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*.”¹⁸ However, while we may not be able to abandon a form of life (because when we abandon one, we inevitably find ourselves in another – in order for us to walk, there must be rough ground under our feet¹⁹), it is entirely possible for us to change internally. It is necessary to develop an ethical system based on the idea of the need for personal development, then behaviour and life will be oriented towards continuous self-improvement: to change the world, one must change oneself.

If life becomes hard to bear we think of improvements. But the most important & effective improvement, in our own attitude, hardly occurs to us, & we can decide on this only with the utmost difficulty.

MS 132 136: 7.10.1946²⁰

Within such an ethical system, it would make sense to talk about the progress of the individual – although in this case, one tends to speak of development instead. The emergence of new technologies and the expansion of scientific knowledge, while they may change the form of life – and indeed do change it, sometimes radically, they were not regarded by Wittgenstein as progress that could be directly attributable to the individual, i.e., progress in the true sense of the word.

Just because a new technological innovation has occurred, it does not mean that we should really describe that as progress²¹.

Therefore, I maintain that for Wittgenstein progress in its conventional understanding pertains to the advancement of science and technology, and it is this sense that he refers to in his notes. It would be an error to categorise Wittgenstein as a general opponent of progress: he does not propose that we revert to being “noble savages”, he rather challenges the paradigm of thinking in terms of scientific and technological progress.

¹⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford 1958, p. 226.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

²⁰ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 60.

²¹ Rupert Read, “Wittgenstein and the Illusion of ‘Progress’: On Real Politics and Real Philosophy in a World of Technocracy”.

Let us consider the quote from Nestroy with which Wittgenstein begins the *Philosophical Investigations* (hereinafter referred to as PI): “Anyway, the thing about progress is that it always seems greater than it really is”.²² R. Read notes that, in his opinion, Wittgenstein²³ directs this thought towards himself and his own progression in philosophical thought – and this might be the only context in which progress does not refer to what the philosopher identified as the form of civilization of his time. Contrary to the view that one should distinguish “two Wittgensteins” – the early one, from the period of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (hereinafter TLP), and the late one, from the period of the PI – thus implying two different philosophies, I adhere to the position that Wittgenstein’s thinking was consistent throughout his life. As an example, it can be pointed out that already in the TLP he signals his negative attitude towards attempts to conflate and equate scientific and life problems, and his opinion on this matter remains unchanged later on. Metaphorically speaking, in the TLP Wittgenstein examines the human skeleton, while in the PI he proceeds to consider the person in flesh, encompassing the entire diversity of their interactions with the external world. Around 1930, in a conversation with Drury, Wittgenstein remarked:

My father was a businessman and I am a businessman too; I want my philosophy to be businesslike, to get something done, to get something settled. [...]

There is no one central problem in philosophy, but countless different problems. Each has to be dealt with on its own. Philosophy is like trying to open a safe with a combination lock: each little adjustment of the dials seems to achieve nothing; only when everything is in place does the door open²⁴.

In this mode of thought, it is entirely reasonable to ask the question: How can one claim to possess universal knowledge²⁵ capable of

²² The fate of this quote is also intriguing, and more can be read about it in Kevin Cahill’s “The Concept of Progress in Wittgenstein’s Thought”, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 1 (60/2006), pp. 71-100.

²³ Wittgenstein insisted in his letter to the publisher that this quote was an indispensable part of his book. For more on this subject, see Kevin Cahill’s work..

²⁴ Maurice O’Connor Drury. *Conversations with Wittgenstein. Ludwig Wittgenstein. Personal Recollections*, Editor R. Phees, Oxford, 1981, pp. 112-182.

²⁵ In this context, we are not discussing philosophy in general or Wittgenstein’s attitude towards metaphysics/ontology and the possibility of constructing unified systems.

transforming society or creating conditions in which the majority can lead a life of contentment without investing personal effort?²⁶ This seems to be a search for a universal panacea, whose existence appears highly improbable. Yet, this notion of universality and externalisation is embedded in our conventional understanding of progress. We are accustomed to the idea that there is a direction of development, which can be represented as an arrow shooting from the past, through the present, and into the future of humanity, with the assumption that the situation cannot deteriorate.²⁷ This is, of course, a very generalised and rough description, but on the whole it does not seem inaccurate to me. A manifestation of this way of thinking can be found in Steven Pinker's book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, in which the author attempts to demonstrate, using statistical data, that we can confidently claim that progress is occurring in all areas of human life. Without delving into an analysis and critique of this approach (which I believe to be flawed), I would like to quote John Gray, a critic of Pinker:

What people like Pinker do is to attempt to manufacture meaning from figures, numbers and statistics. In my book I suggest that there might be, in the near future, a state-of-the-art electronic tablet that continuously generates that kind of meaning from numbers. In fact, I suggest that those who believe in reason—but at the same time lack any deeper religious faith and are too weak to live in doubt—should turn to the sorcery of numbers.²⁸

Victor Klemperer expresses a similar attitude to progress:

I have lived through three epochs of German history, the Wilhelmine era, the Weimar republic and the Hitler period. The republic, almost suicidally, lifted all controls on freedom of expression; the national Socialists used to claim scornfully that they were only taking advantage of the rights granted them by the constitution when in their books and newspapers they mercilessly attacked the state and all its institutions and guiding principles using every available weapon of satire and belligerent sermonizing. There were no restraints whatsoever in the realm of

²⁶ Note that we typically think within the paradigm of happiness and/or prosperity, and we hardly ever come across thought on virtue.

²⁷ However, this concept is changing, and today the situation looks somewhat different in Western Europe: some residents are uncertain whether their children and grandchildren will have a better standard of living than they do.

²⁸ The full text of the interview available at <https://www.vice.com/en/article/exmj3e/john-gray-freedom>, accessed 25 august 2023.

the arts and sciences, aesthetics and philosophy. Nobody was bound to a particular moral dogma or ideal of beauty, everyone was free to choose. This motley intellectual freedom was celebrated as a tremendous and decisive leap forward compared with the imperial age.²⁹

Conceiving of progress as a linear process is not only erroneous but also perilous: it diminishes our vigilance and our ability to respond swiftly. In the real world, things and situations seldom evolve exactly as we anticipate or even plan (although the emergence and rapid development of artificial intelligence may alter this):

The truly apocalyptic view of the world is that things do not repeat themselves. It is not e.g. absurd to believe that the scientific & technological age is the beginning of the end for humanity, that the idea of Great Progress is a bedazzlement, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge & that humanity, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means clear that this is not how things are.

MS 133 90: 7.1.1947

A man's dreams are virtually never realized.

MS 133 118: 19.1.1947

It could only be by accident that someone's dreams about the future of philosophy, art, science would come true. What he sees is a continuation of his own world in his dream, that is to say PERHAPS his wish (and perhaps not) but not reality. It might still happen that a person's photograph, e.g., changed with time, almost as if he were aging on it. But its changes then take place according to their own laws & why should they lead in a parallel direction to the development of the real person?

MS 134 27: 10-15.3.1947³⁰

In the light of these passages, I do not believe that Wittgenstein was directly and negatively disposed towards progress itself, even in its scientific understanding, but rather against the belief held by the majority people (contemporary to the philosopher and representatives of a specific territory, i.e., a specific cultural code) that it is possible to delegate responsibility for the future to some ongoing process that will lead to a necessarily positive outcome. For if we believe that history is unfolding along a straight line

²⁹ Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, trans. M. Brady, London 2000 p. 20.

³⁰ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 64, 65.

from a starting point to an endpoint, and that this is always development, or a movement that invariably leads to improvement,³¹ then it is much easier to believe in and accept some form of historical determinism. In such a belief framework, there can be a growing tendency to relinquish or transfer responsibility – not to some religious Absolute, but to an impersonal, historically confirmed, and scientifically approved process, which we call progress. And this may have irreversible consequences.

Wittgenstein often expressed pessimistic sentiments, for example concerning the current state of the philosophical community (focusing primarily on England and Western Europe), or the future after World War II. The following note exemplifies this proclivity:

The hysterical fear of the atom bomb the public now has, or at least expresses, is almost a sign that here for once a really salutary discovery has been made. At least the fear gives the impression of being fear in the face of a really effective bitter medicine. I cannot rid myself of the thought: if there were not something good here, the philistines would not be making an outcry. But perhaps this too is a childish idea. For all I can mean really is that the bomb creates the prospect of the end, the destruction of a ghastly evil, of disgusting soapy water science and certainly that is not an unpleasant thought.

MS 131 66 c: 19.8.1946³²

Ray Monk asserts: “What links this apocalyptic anxiety with his hostility to academic philosophy is his detestation of the power of science in our age, which on the one hand encouraged the philosopher’s ‘craving for generality’, and on the other produced the atomic bomb.”³³

This pessimism was not unique to Wittgenstein. Similar thoughts were expressed by Robert Oppenheimer, referred to as the ‘father’ of the atomic bomb, following its use in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This is discussed by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin in their biography of the scientist:

“We have made a thing, a most terrible weapon,” he told an audience of the American Philosophical Society, “that has altered abruptly and profoundly the nature of the world [...] a thing that by all the standards of the world we

³¹ We are not talking here about philosophical reflection on progress, but about a certain general common perception and attitude towards progress.

³² Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 55.

³³ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*, New York, 1990, p. 789.

grew up in is an evil thing. And by so doing [...] we have raised again the question of whether science is good for man?"³⁴

Wittgenstein maintained a distinctly negative attitude towards the scientific-technological form that progress took in his civilisation,³⁵ yet he offers no alternative. He does not formulate ideas for potential changes in society and its future life, proposes no plan for improvement, and does not point out the 'correct' path. In this, Wittgenstein remains highly consistent: there is no universal solution, and the only thing we can and must strive for is clarity of thought.

Wittgenstein and socio-political views

If you were not a revolutionary in your youth, you lack heart; if you have not become a conservative in your old age, you lack wisdom.³⁶

There is little to be said about Wittgenstein's attitude to politics: he did not express himself directly, and political philosophy was not among his interests. The only thing we can do if we wish to define the philosopher's political position is to interpret his actions and some of his statements. But is that really so important? Can Wittgenstein's political views be of any use to us today in any way? Probably not. Nevertheless, given our topic is progress and Wittgenstein's attitude towards it, I would like to consider the issue of his image as a conservative thinker.³⁷ I would like to make clear that I think it important not to assign Wittgenstein to this or that camp, but instead to show that his reflections can be fruitfully used to change the way we approach any opposition.

When discussing conservatism or a conservative way of thinking, it is hard to see how it can successfully coexist or work together with progress or progressive thought. David Bloor, in his analysis of Mannheim's

³⁴ Kai Bird, Martin J. Sherwin, *American Prometheus. The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, New York, 2006, EPUB, Chap. 2.

³⁵ Again, the complexity of the discourse on progress is evident: a negative or positive attitude towards progress implies it is acceptance as an accomplished fact and/or that it is unfolding in the world in its linearity.

³⁶ This saying is often mistakenly attributed to Churchill.

³⁷ For example, Andrew Lugg "Was Wittgenstein a conservative thinker?", David Bloor "Wittgenstein jako myśliciel konserwatywny", Lotar Rasiński *Śladami Marksa i Wittgensteina*.

philosophy, writes that the conservative style of thinking emerged as a reaction to the French Revolution³⁸ when unreflective traditionalism was forced to defend itself. This instantly created an opposition between the revolutionary and the conservative. The former always advocates moving forward, into the future, while the latter consistently looks to the past.

What is really at issue is a matter of attitudes towards time, and attitudes towards the present moment in time. Mannheim brings this out clearly when he says that for the progressive, natural law thinker the present is the beginning of the future. For the conservative thinker, by contrast, the present is the end of the past.³⁹

However, can this characterization really be construed as indicating an attitude towards change and hence progress? When Wittgenstein is described as a conservative thinker, reference is made to *Philosophical Investigations*, where he discusses following a rule, not based on the interpretation of that rule—i.e., sensible understanding (as that would lead us to an infinite regress)—but based on practice, i.e., blindly: “To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions)”⁴⁰ Customs and traditions are closely tied to the past and arise only as a result of specific practices. The future is also present, but it is always in some way mediated by the past, dependent on it. As I mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein believed that we are always already in a certain form of life, that we have to master it before we can reflect upon it. Those who study Wittgenstein from the perspective of conservatism also put forward other arguments derived from the evidence of his biography. So the question arises as to the possibility of any meaningful criticism of the existing socio-political system, or of a phenomenon such as revolution, within a given system of reasoning. One can respond in various ways, depending on the interpretation of Wittgenstein’s thought (I will not delve into this question here, but I refer readers to Lotar Rasinski’s book *Śladami Marksa i Wittgensteina*, in which the author conducts a fairly detailed analysis). Wittgenstein himself made the following notes:

³⁸ David Bloor, “Wittgenstein as a Conservative Thinker”, *The Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge* (2000), p. 5.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 118-119.

Where there is bad management in the state, I believe, bad management is fostered in families too. A worker who is ready for a strike⁴⁴ at any time will not bring up his children to respect order either.

MS 135 102: 27.7.1947

The revolutionary will be the one who can revolutionize himself.

MS 165 204: ca. 1944⁴¹

It might seem that these notes clearly indicate the philosopher's distinctly conservative thinking. However, I do not see this as conservatism. Rather, on the one hand, I see an appeal to tradition and thus to cultural memory, due to the need to maintain order (I deliberately omit the issue of a badly-managed economy), and on the other hand, an appeal to reconsider attempts that come from the outside and seek to force radical change upon society, which is the essence of revolution. The former aligns Wittgenstein with the thoughts of some Russian philosophers, according to whom progress is not found in the future, but in the past.

If you wish to be a man of the future, contemporary man, do not forget Father Anchises and the native gods amidst the smoking ruins. [...] The saviour shall be saved. This is the mystery of progress - there is no second and there will not be. (Anchises – a relative of the Trojan King Priam, beloved by Aphrodite, who bore him a son, Aeneas. With the fall of Troy, Aeneas carried the elderly father on his shoulders out of the burning city. After long wanderings, Aeneas settled in Italy, his descendants founded Rome, and the Julian clan, tracing its origins back to him, gave the first dynasty of Roman emperors.)⁴²

I would relate the second aspect to Wittgenstein's requirement for clear thinking: as Monk writes, Wittgenstein once told Drury that he would like to have as an epigraph to his book (PI) the words of the Earl of Kent from King Lear (Act I, Scene IV): "I'll teach you differences".⁴³ And this is truly significant when it comes to changes, especially those brought about by revolutions. Revolution is associated with radicalism, and conservatism more with reformism. However, this distinction in its usual sense is erroneous, as Erich Fromm points out:

⁴¹ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 72, 51.

⁴² Władimir Sołowjow, *Tajemnica postępu*, available at: <http://www.magister.msk.ru/library/philos/solovyov/solovv23.htm>, accessed 13 august 2023.

⁴³ Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*, p. 869.

Reform which is not radical, in this sense, never accomplishes its ends and eventually ends up in the opposite direction. So-called "radicalism" on the other hand, which believes that we can solve problems by force, when observation, patience and continuous activity is required, is as unrealistic and fictitious as reform. Historically speaking, they both often lead to the same result. The revolution of the Bolsheviks led to Stalinism, the reform of the right wing Social Democrats in Germany, led to Hitler. The true criterion of reform is not its tempo but its realism, its true "radicalism"; it is the question whether it goes to the roots and attempts to change causes—or whether it remains on the surface and attempts to deal only with symptoms⁴⁴.

Certainly, I do not reject the idea of revolution outright, just as, in my opinion, Wittgenstein did not either (after all, his sympathy towards the Soviet Union is no secret); it simply does not fall within his area of interest. I reiterate: what matters is the clarity of thinking and the clarity of "language games" within the appropriate "form of life". Revolution, after all, is not devoid of ambivalence either.

In every revolution, be it political, social, artistic or literary in nature, there are always two principles at work: on the one hand the appetite for the new, whereby the total contrast with what was previously valid is swiftly stressed, and on the other the need to connect with the past, to use tradition as a defence. What one is doing isn't absolutely new, rather it is a return to those things which the foregoing age had shamefully rejected, a return to humanity, the nation, morality or the true nature of art, and so on⁴⁵.

Therefore, reasoning within the dichotomy of conservative-revolutionary (especially if this also matches by analogy to being 'for or against' progress) does not seem to me to be particularly effective. On this matter, I am not inclined to place Wittgenstein in a certain "camp"; I rather endeavour to apply his ideas constructively, and thus to reflect upon (as does R. Read) our contemporary understanding of progress and our relationship to it.

Conclusion

To sum up the foregoing considerations, I am convinced that Wittgenstein's philosophy can help us elucidate many aspects of thinking about such an ambiguous and complex phenomenon as progress. In this article, I once

⁴⁴ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, London, 1956 p. 266.

⁴⁵ Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, pp. 77-78.

again attempted to focus attention on the heterogeneity of progress and the impossibility of thinking about it “generally”. To meet the challenges we face today, an integrated approach is essential.

[...] sanity and mental health can be attained only by simultaneous changes in the sphere of industrial and political organization, of spiritual and philosophical orientation, of character structure, and of cultural activities. The concentration of effort in any of these spheres, to the exclusion or neglect of others, is destructive of all change. In fact, here seems to lie one of the most important obstacles to the progress of mankind. [...]

[...] Undoubtedly one step of integrated progress in all spheres of life will have more far-reaching and more lasting results for the progress of the human race than a hundred steps preached—and even for a short while lived—in only one isolated sphere. Several thousands of years of failure in “isolated progress” should be a rather convincing lesson.⁴⁶

When discussing the necessity of an integrated approach to solving problems associated with progress, it is imperative to remember that only through comprehending our own grounding in a “form of life”, reflecting upon this form, and appropriately reforming “language games” will we be led to progress, not merely in form, but in substance.

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⁴⁶ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, pp. 264-265.

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