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# Wittgenstein and Psychoanalysis: Back to the Future of Illusion Where Freud and Wittgenstein meet without knowing it

## Summary:

Apart from their apparent divergences or criticisms, Freud and Wittgenstein share at least one important point, which distinguishes them from most of the preceding philosophical tradition: they have put the role of *illusion* back on the philosophical agenda, which it had strangely been absent from for about 250 years. This rediscovery concerns not only people who desperately or childishly flock to an illusion like flies in a glass. It equally concerns people who are in the know, but still deal with a particular illusion, in their discourse or in their tacit practice. And finally, it concerns people who precisely by trying to be rational, fall back into illusion.

Freud's and Wittgenstein's theories share important cornerstones that set them in opposition to the majority of modern philosophical tradition, thereby constituting an "epistemological break." To find these cornerstones, we do not have to look at either the explicit remarks one author makes about the other or at the questions that they obviously share yet answer differently. We have to look elsewhere. One shared methodical starting point of both authors resides in the notion of *illusion*.

Not only Freud, but also Wittgenstein thinks that his practice is a cure,[1] and, consequently, that his patients are suffering. This means that affect is involved. Patients not only have true or false ideas, but they suffer because they have ideas caused by and affixed by wishes. This is precisely what Freud's notion of illusion designates: an illusion is an idea (be it true or false) caused by and affixed by a wish (cf. Freud [1927c]: 31). Accordingly, Freud and Wittgenstein share a fundamental awareness: awareness of the fact that what they argue against is never just a false opinion, but an illusion. The aim is therefore not only to produce the true idea, but rather, to destroy the illusion; to tackle the wish that made the illusion an idea on which someone is fixated without alternative.[2]

## Knowledge and Belief

A first significant illusion tackled by both Freud and Wittgenstein concerns questions about the relationship between knowledge, belief, and ritual or compulsive action. In traditional approaches, this relationship was spontaneously regarded as a simple causal chain. Belief was regarded as an error, an opinion, a false knowledge, and from this false knowledge followed, as its application, false, erroneous action.

This traditional type of approach can be seen, for example in the way the so-called “mythologist school” in anthropology (E. B. Tylor, J. G. Frazer) dealt with magic rituals: According to this influential school, first comes myth, and then follows a ritual that expresses or stages the myth. Myth is regarded here as an error, an opinion or false knowledge. If you do not hold this opinion, but have, instead, true knowledge, then you will not perform the ritual that follows from the opinion. Whereas if you perform the ritual, this means that you hold that opinion.

Wittgenstein opposes this view sharply in his criticism of Frazer’s theory. What Wittgenstein claims is the following: The fact that you perform the ritual does not imply that you have a certain opinion. And it also does not imply that you do not have the right knowledge about things. You can have knowledge and still perform the ritual. The language game of ritual practice, its place in the social field, is not that of a technique. And the status of belief, its place in the psychic field, is not that of an opinion (and not even necessarily that of faith).

Wittgenstein points out that this type of split within the social and the psychic field does not occur solely among savages. Referring to examples of his own “civilized” experience, Wittgenstein reminds himself (and us) that we constantly make a split between what we know or believe and how we act:

“When I am furious about something, I sometimes beat the ground or a tree with my walking stick. But I certainly do not believe that the ground is to blame or that my beating can help anything” (Wittgenstein 1993: 137).

Quite often, we act compulsively and our action stages an illusion that clearly opposes our knowledge and belief.

Freud even goes one step further here. His position is, not only does performing the ritual not imply a certain opinion, but, as Freud finds out, *performing the ritual, on the contrary, even requires abandonment of the opinion*. Only when you have overcome a certain narcissistic belief, are you able to perform the very ritual that appears to express this belief. This can be observed, for example, with regard to fetishism: The fetish arises at the precise moment when, as Freud states, a belief is abandoned (cf. Freud [1927e]: 154). The fetish (together with the ritual practices that are associated with it) replaces the belief. Therefore, the relationship between the belief and the fetishistic ritual practice is that of mutual exclusion: *fetishism is found precisely where (fetishistic) belief is not*. Within the Freudian framework this means: Only when you have overcome the belief that mother possesses a phallus, are you able to find the fetish fascinating. If you still believed in the maternal phallus, then the fetish would not be of any interest to you.

Yet, as Freud found out, this paradoxical structure does not apply solely to perverts. (Just as Wittgenstein had shown that magic action does not occur only among savages.) The same goes for the uncanny, which is a quality that affects all adults (unless they are psychotic). Uncanniness does not exist for children: if you are not adult, if you still believe, as a child does, in the existence of ghosts, then the appearance of a ghost may well be frightening (i.e., evoking fear), but it will not be uncanny (i.e., causing anxiety). Therefore, as Freud points out, the fairy tale that presupposes the existence of spiritual beings is not uncanny. Yet if you do not believe in the existence of ghosts, then any seeming appearance of a ghost will be uncanny for you. Therefore, the ghost story, which starts from the “enlightened” viewpoint, which denies the existence of ghosts, is uncanny (cf. Freud [1919h]: 250). Thus, you can only really shock adults with uncanniness, only those people who do not believe in ghosts.

Obviously there is a small difference here between Wittgenstein and Freud. What separates Freud from Wittgenstein with regard to this point can be compared to their dissension concerning the interpretation of dreams or of slips of the tongue: Wittgenstein tends to question necessity and causality, whereas Freud postulates them (cf. Wittgenstein [1966]: 42, 44; 1993: 131; Bouveresse 1991: 63, 101). Also with regard to rituals, Wittgenstein claims the *non-necessity of a correlation* between ritual practice and belief. Freud, on the contrary, claims the *necessity of the non-correlation; of mutual exclusion*.

Yet what is much more important here is the fact that both Wittgenstein and Freud reject the illusion of a necessity of correlation between belief and practice. They do not simply replace a wrong idea with a better one. Instead, they introduce an idea that had been hitherto impossible; an idea that had been kept unthinkable by the predominant illusion; blocked by the epistemological obstacle formed by the wish inherent to the illusion.

As usual in the history of the sciences, the introduction of an idea that had hitherto been impossible implies a scandal, an “insult” (*Kränkung*), a certain loss—a loss of a key element of wishful thinking. This is the point where the new understanding of the illusion within the life of the savage, the neurotic, and the civilized person becomes a criticism of the illusion inherent to traditional theories about those people.

A first consequence of this “insulting” finding is, of course, that the savages’, and the perverts’ marks of distinction are lost. It turns out that savages are just as split as civilized people, and that all adults are just as split as fetishists. This does not mean that there is no difference between “savage” societies organized around the principle of taboo and societies organized around principles such as moral or juridical prohibition. Yet if there is a difference, the difference is not where “civilized” illusion wants it to be. “Civilized” illusion poses the Other as caught up in illusion, and it wants itself to be beyond illusion. It poses a naïve Other and an enlightened self. What “civilized” illusion cannot stand—the idea that it has to exclude as impossible by the necessity of its own wish—is the fact that ritual and compulsive practice cannot be overcome by enlightenment, that there is a necessary split between what we believe and what we do, and that therefore, even civilized people perform magic acts, just as so-called savages who are in fact equally enlightened. If there is a difference, then it consists in the fact that savages are aware of their magic practices whereas civilized people are unaware of their own magic (a reason why one could feel inclined to call the civilized people—in Wittgenstein’s words—“much more savage than the savages”, cf. Wittgenstein 1993: 131).

Both Freud and Wittgenstein dwell here at the reverse aspect of a finding made by the religious philosopher Blaise Pascal: Pascal discovered that faithful people are not always able to perform religious rituals. On the contrary, a strong faith can hinder them from doing what ordinary believers do. Not performing rituals is an effect of excessive faith, of excessive identification. Performing only becomes possible under the condition of humour, allowing oneself to do something silly, to fall into “*abetissement*.” Pascal writes:

“You want to find faith and do not know the way? You want to cure yourself of unbelief and you ask for the remedies? Learn from those who have been bound like you.... Follow the way by which they began; by behaving just as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. That will make you believe quite naturally, and will humiliate your understanding” (cf. Pascal 1995, pp. 155–6).[3]

Far from assuming that a subject’s difficulty in performing religious rituals stemmed from a lack of belief, Pascal discovered that it was precisely a surplus of conviction that made corresponding action impossible.[4]

Wittgenstein and Freud provide a criticism of a powerful illusion in that they both insist on the thesis that ritual action cannot be taken as proof of a corresponding belief. We can call this illusion that they criticize “homogenization of the Other.” Every Other whom we assume is a believer because we have observed him committing a ritual action, becomes homogenized: Assuming that “When he acts, he must believe,” we imagine that he is not split, like ourselves, between believing one thing and doing another. The Other becomes then, in our imagination, a perfectly enjoying, non-castrated being, and because of this he becomes an object of our hatred and envy: since if he is not castrated, he must be the reason for our own castration. All the typical envies, especially the post-modernist ones of our times, can be traced back to this structure, as Jacques-Alain Miller has remarked.[5] For example, the smoking Other whom we perceive as someone caught up in the happy ignorance that smoking does not harm human health, becomes an instance of an incredibly unbroken enjoyment, an object of our hatred. We regard her as a private person heedlessly pursuing her own sinister passions in public, at our expense; we see her as a “thief of enjoyment,”[6] and call

the police. As long as we perceived her, on the contrary, as a “public man,”[7] following the imperatives of her role in public space, we acknowledged her split, and her enjoyment was most welcome to us: we perceived her smoke as a ritual action undertaken to provide an elegant appearance, as a gesture aiming to please us, and we saw her pleasure as something that could be shared in solidarity.

Here, the theoretical gain provided by both Freud and Wittgenstein comprises separating the considerations concerning knowledge, belief, and faith from the hidden affects concerning the enjoyment of the Other. When the illusion consisting of the homogenization of the Other is avoided, it becomes possible to conceive of an Other who has a certain knowledge at his disposal despite the belief that his action seems to express. Ritual action is no longer regarded as an effect of a theoretical conviction. Furthermore, this action also does not necessarily have to stem from the subject’s faith. This has been elaborated convincingly by the French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni:[8] What a subject does, for example, when reading a horoscope or disseminating fatal “chain-e-mails,” stems from neither his knowledge nor from his religious faith but from something that we can call “anonymous people’s beliefs” or “illusions without owners”.[9] In social practices, such as politeness, for example, we also do not pay tribute to what we know or what we are convinced of, but to “what other people might believe.” Interestingly enough, precisely this dimension of other, anonymous people’s beliefs is most often the source of our own compulsive behaviors: for example, when we “punish” our computers for malfunction, or when we “cross our fingers” for our favorite sports stars on TV.

Due to Freud’s and Wittgenstein’s advances, instead of a theoretical pattern that supposed only one “belief” (true or false knowledge) for one subject, it is now possible to conceive of a subject composed of – at least – (1) knowledge, plus (2) own faith, plus (3) beliefs of anonymous others.

### **Re-doubling: Doubting the Doubt. Finitude of Rationality, and Rationality of Finitude**

Another parallel between Freud’s and Wittgenstein’s respective philosophical treatments can be traced back to a figure of thought pertaining to ancient materialism. It is a figure of redoubling—of applying a principle back onto itself. In Epicurus, for example, this figure appears when it comes to the Aristotelian issue of moderation. Epicurus writes:

“There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance” (Epicurus, Vatican Sayings §63).

Moderation, as a principle of simplifying one’s life, has to be applied back onto itself—in order to obtain its true meaning. One cannot do that without limits; one has to moderate oneself *in a moderate way*. Otherwise, moderation reverses into its obscene opposite: extravagance—the unmoderated excess of moderation.

(Please note, incidentally, the contemporary importance of this remark by Epicurus. What our time lacks most is this materialist ability of redoubling moderation. What we do today is moderate ourselves in the most immoderate way: no sex, almost no alcohol, no tobacco, no furs, and even no adult language, etc.)

Freud produces the same figure of thought when it comes to doubt. In his lecture on “Dream and Occultism,” he states:

“If one regards oneself as a sceptic, it is a good plan to have occasional doubts about one’s scepticism too.” (Freud [1933a]: 53)

The point not to be missed here is that for Freud, applying the principle of doubt to doubt itself is not a consequence of the universalization of this principle. That would have been Hegel’s position: if you really want to doubt, then you have to doubt everything, including doubt itself, so if we apply the principle in a

consequent way, we end up with its negation. (Precisely in order to avoid such a contradictory consequence, Bertrand Russell stated, in his theory of logical types, that principles [logical functions] can never be applied to themselves.)[10]

For Freud, on the contrary, self-application of the principle is not an effect of its universalization, as it does not come after universalization. Instead, it comes before: Self-application is there in order to avoid universalization. Doubting doubt serves to prevent doubt from doubting everything.

The same is to be found in Wittgenstein who states:

“...[A] doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt” (Wittgenstein OC § 450; 1982: 117).

Universalization would lead to a point of redoubling where doubt would finally suspend itself, where it would become pointless. Redoubling doubt in the beginning, as a first step, on the contrary, puts a limit on doubt, preventing universalization and thereby rescuing doubt from becoming pointless.

It may be interesting to think about the question of what illusion is at stake here. What wish could lead us to believe that a principle could and should be universalized and applied to everything, until, in the end, it meets up with itself?

To answer this, we should probably think of examples of such a structure in our contemporary society—just as Wittgenstein and Freud demonstrated it, by comparing the savage to the philosopher or the civilized neurotic, and the pervert to the normal adult. What we can observe today is that, in a kind of enlightened, 1968-era-heritage, most practices are submitted to “quality control,” “assessment,” “audit,” etc. This appears to help avoid unquestioned authoritarian structures. For example, at the university, there can no longer be any professors who act like primordial fathers, who do whatever they want and are beyond any rules. No, now they are evaluated, assessed, controlled, etc. This appears to correspond to the enlightened principle of questioning everything and not letting any traditional authorities persist.[11]

Yet what we can observe is that precisely by this implementation of seemingly enlightened practices, all institutions become more and more repressive. Not only professors, but also students are increasingly subject to control. They can no longer study what they want; following their interests and embarking on the paths along which their curiosity and creativity lead them. No, they have to follow rigid curricula and pass hundreds of exams for every little step, and, most importantly, meet strict deadlines. (Along the same lines, researchers must write applications where they are forced to anticipate every little step in what they are supposed to be finding out. The prosaic poetry of research applications becomes abundant and begins to work as an obstacle to any unpredicted discovery.) The university has thus become a space of coercion rather than stimulation. What once seemed to be enlightenment, has turned out to be blind force.

How could this happen? It is clear that these “dialectics of enlightenment” are again due to a universalization of a principle. Control was universalized before it was controlled, that is, applied to itself. We have not developed any measures for limiting control to the cases where it belongs; we did not allow it not to apply itself to cases where it does not belong and where it is not useful. This is a logical outcome of a 1968-era -principle: What we understood after 1968 was that indiscriminate authority had to be questioned. But what we did not yet understand was that questioning itself also had to be questioned in order to not let it become a new, indiscriminate authority. Instead, we have indulged in a dream of endless questioning and controlling, which we wrongly identified with an endless enlightened self-transparency. We dreamed therefore of an endlessness of rationality. This was our illusion, our wish.

Wittgenstein and Freud, on the contrary, have discovered a dimension of finitude—a finitude that is not just a sad end of rationality, but rather, its founding condition. There has to be an end to rationality, otherwise it starts to run wild. Wittgenstein pointed this out when he spoke about calculation. You can calculate the same operation again and again in order to avoid error. Yet, in order to make it a rational operation, you have to stop at some point. Mathematical calculation is based not only on the pure, rational knowledge of

arithmetic operations, but equally on making a decision. Without this decision making, the proliferation of checking and re-checking becomes irrational (cf. Wittgenstein OC §§ 77, 212; 1982: 28, 60). Even a seemingly pure, rational practice such as calculating requires decision making. (The same idea that is found in Wittgenstein, is, by the way, expressed by Walter Benjamin in his notorious remark that thinking comprises not only the movement of thoughts, but also their stopping.[12])

This embarrassing discovery of decision making's necessity for rationality is currently widely unacknowledged. Decision making is currently always hidden behind seemingly rational, "objective" procedures. Authorities – and even some elected governments, as in the recent cases of Italy and Greece – have disappeared, and technocrats and bureaucrats have taken their place— thus becoming the new, uncontrolled authorities of a society of technocratic and bureaucratic governance, of *gouvernementalité*, as Michel Foucault called it. (It is thus no surprise that in such an atmosphere, new indiscriminate authorities, for instance, obscene prime ministers and uncannily powerful presidents with backgrounds in the secret service, pop up.)

In Freud, it is possible to find the same idea, for example when he describes his basic assumptions as "positions," or "theses"— in German: "Aufstellungen" (cf. Freud [1910h]: 195). These are theoretical decisions, constructions, non-discussed points that are necessary for opening up a field in which alternatives can be discussed. What can be explained *later* is based on principles that cannot be explained—at least not in advance. Every knowledge that can explain itself is therefore, according to Freud, based on decisions, on knowledge that cannot explain itself, knowledge that does not know of itself.[13] This insight into a necessary non-seeing at the base of any transparency—and of course into the necessity of covering up this non-seeing by illusions of self-transparency, can be subsumed under Freud's notion of the unconscious. With regard to the above mentioned problems of bureaucratization in contemporary Western society, the psychoanalytic position is obvious. These bureaucratic apparatuses declare themselves the safeguards of "reflexive consciousness", presupposing that things become necessarily better and more transparent when they are accompanied by some kind of report or audit. Freud's psychoanalysis, on the contrary, was aware of the fact that reflexive consciousness as a rule does not lead to increasing insight but on the contrary functions as a defence against it.

We can therefore say that Wittgenstein's notion of decision and Freud's notion of the unconscious are the keywords, the battle hymns, the shibboleths for today's necessary political struggle against a rationality that has become irrational. A rationality that has been indiscriminately universalized, instead of being applied to itself in the first place—which would have produced its necessary redoubling and thus allowed it to be rational in the only true sense: rational *in a rational way*.

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## **Appendix: Drawing the Connecting Lines between the Shared Points in Freud and Wittgenstein**

Perhaps it is of use to briefly investigate how points 1 and 2, the two points of encounter between Wittgenstein's and Freud's theories, are linked. How can we draw a line between these two issues tackled by the two theorists, (1) the homogenization of the Other, and (2) the indiscriminate universalization of a principle, the ignorance of finitude?

### 1. a) Freud's link

Starting from Freud's theory, the link between the two problems can be established through the notion of narcissism. For a narcissistic ego, the idea of its own splitting (into knowledge and belief expressed in action) is unbearable. This idea has, as a consequence, to be projected outside: "It is not I that is split, but there is a split between me and the Other." This Other, then, is conceived as narcissistic—or, as we have called it, homogeneous. This shows how narcissism leads to the homogenization of the Other.

At the same time, this narcissism causes the bombarding of the ego by a tyrannical, infantile superego. This superego bombards the ego with commands, such as “Be yourself!”, “Be rational!”, “...and, all the time!” This is how narcissism leads to the indiscriminate universalization of principles and accounts for rationality going mad.

An adult superego, on the contrary, would allow the ego to regard itself more graciously, to look from an elevated position down on its little stupidities, and smile at itself, with sympathy. Thus, the adult superego functions, as Freud argues, as an agent of humour (cf. Freud [1927d]). Humour is what allows us not to be ourselves or rational all the time. Only with humour are we able to put rationality where it belongs, and keep it away from where it does not belong. Humour is the very capacity of redoubling: it prevents us from trying *to be rational at any price*; instead allowing us *to be rational in a rational way*.

#### 1. b) Wittgenstein's link[14]

In Wittgenstein's theory, the reason for the criticism against Frazer (and the figure of the homogenization of the Other) is the notion of the plurality of language games. According to Wittgenstein's discovery, one and the same subject is always necessarily part of (and subject to) several language games, such as gaining knowledge, committing rituals, alluding to mythologies, using metaphors, joking, etc. Due to this plurality of language games, the Wittgensteinian subject is necessarily a split subject, operating differently on the levels of knowledge, faith, *façons de parler*, belief, and behavior, etc., as Wittgenstein has nicely pointed out in his self-observations. Just as in the savage, magic behaviour is not a place-holder for a technical rationality that would come later, in modern society (as Frazer assumed), but co-exists with it, in the so-called civilized person, technical rationality does not replace former magic rituals but accompanies them without contradiction. For the same reason, one language game should never be universalized and transformed into a standard for all language games (such as a rule like, “Being meaningful means to be either true or wrong” can only be applied to certain kinds of utterances, but not to all). Instead, any language game has to be limited by its own standard: the language game of doubting, for example, has to be limited in such a way that a doubt remains a doubt.

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## Notes:

[1] Cf. Wittgenstein 2009: § 255 (p. 98e): “The philosopher treats a question; like an illness.” (“Der Philosoph *behandelt* eine Frage; wie eine Krankheit.” Wittgenstein 2001, § 255. The italics in this sentence are omitted in the 2009 bilingual edition.)

[2] See, here, Wittgenstein 1993: 119: “To convince someone of the truth, it is not enough to state it, but rather one must find the path from error to truth.”; Freud [1907a]: 80: “The conviction is displaced, as it were, from the unconscious truth on to the unconscious error that is linked to it, and remains fixated there

precisely as a result of this displacement.”; Freud [1925e]: “The state of affairs is enough to account for the reluctant and hesitant reception of analysis in scientific quarters. But it does not explain the outbursts of indignation, derision and scorn which, in disregard of every standard of logic and good taste, have characterized the controversial methods of its opponents. A reaction of such a kind suggests that resistances other than purely intellectual ones were stirred up and that powerful emotional forces were aroused.” See, on this general problem, also Gaston Bachelard’s psychoanalytic theory of science, especially his notion of “epistemological obstacle” (cf. Bachelard 1947; Balibar 1978). For the problem of individual and social resistances to psychoanalysis cf. Althusser 1996: 23f.

[3] In French, the last sentence reads, even more tellingly: “cela vous fera croire et vous abêtira” [Pascal 1965, p. 227f. (§ 451)].

[4] For a more detailed account of this problem see Pfaller 2014: 222-229.

[5] Cf. Miller 1994: 79f.

[6] Cf. Žižek 1993: 207.

[7] See on this notion, Sennett [1974].

[8] Cf. Mannoni 2003.

[9] See for this Pfaller 2014: 44-72.

[10] I have elaborated on this more extensively in my recent German book „Wofuer es sich zu leben lohnt. Elemente materialistischer Philosophie“, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 2012, chapter 10.

[11] See on this, Power 1994, 1997; Schwarz 2006.

[12] “Zum Denken gehört nicht nur die Bewegung der Gedanken, sondern ebenso ihre Stillstellung” (Benjamin 1980: 702)

[13] For this necessary precedence of the *fact* of knowledge over its *justification* cf. Althusser 1990: 224ff.

[14] For a more detailed elaboration on this problem see Pfaller 2011: 148-159.

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