

Wittgenstein and Intellectual Freedom

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein from the perspective of Intellectual Freedom in librarianship. The article argues that Intellectual Freedom tends to be informed by individualism and linguistic idealism. This in turn limits IF to advocacy rather than social change and thereby supports and maintains the oppressive racial and gender structures of capitalism. Following an outline of the philosophical foundations of Intellectual Freedom, the article investigates Wittgenstein's challenge to language as an individual faculty and the constraints on the idea of freedom that follows from it. Wittgenstein's recognition that languages are social conventions put to particular social uses opens up a collective approach to language and Intellectual Freedom conducive to the material transformation of real social conditions.

Keywords: critical theory, intellectual freedom, libraries, politics, Wittgenstein



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Introduction

In recent years, the concept of Intellectual Freedom (IF) in librarianship has been challenged in a number of new ways. While there has been, since the late 1960s, an alternative tendency within librarianship—known as Social Responsibility (Samek 2001)—absolutist conceptions¹ of IF remain dominant within the profession. The new cycle of challenges shares much of the perspectives of Social Responsibility, often going further in its critique. It does not simply challenge absolutist Intellectual Freedom from within the dominant language of liberalism, rights, and democracy, but questions the political presumptions of racial capitalism and liberal-democracy itself.

In this article, I will briefly sketch out the dominant philosophical lineage of Intellectual Freedom before turning to the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Despite the fact that Wittgenstein's philosophy has led, in James Tully's words, to "a revolution in philosophy and the human sciences" (Tully 1995, p. 106), Intellectual Freedom discourse rarely, if ever, engages with his work. I will argue that Wittgenstein's work challenges the dominant philosophical approaches to IF from within mainstream philosophy, and Wittgenstein himself directly touches on the question of Intellectual Freedom in his later writings. After laying the groundwork of a critique of mainstream IF discourse drawing on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, I will explore his own conception of Intellectual Freedom to see what lessons libraries might usefully draw from it.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the nature of the Social Responsibility movement, it should be noted that Social Responsibility was part of a broader challenge to the establishment² that arose in the 1960s and included the civil rights and "gay liberation" movements, as well as second-wave feminism, anti-colonial uprisings, and worker-student revolts. The "Friday the 13th Manifesto" which informed the creation of the Social Responsibilities Round Table argued that since librarianship was reflective of the "values and attitudes of the Establishment", the profession ought to reject its ostensible neutrality and turn to advocacy for the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised (quoted in

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- 1 The term "absolutist" has been criticized as inaccurate or inappropriate by those who hold it, but the expression derives from Michael Gorman, not a radical member of the profession by any means. See Gorman 2000, pp. 89–92.
 - 2 Stuart Hall writes that between 1964 and 1968 "the world turned". In that period, the "great consensus of the 1950s" was challenged, and when the state and the ruling classes began to understand that what appeared merely as anti-establishment childishness (we can think of the Beatles or Monty Python here), or a fad for "permissiveness" was in fact "something worse than that—something close to an organized and active conspiracy against the social order" (Hall 2017, pp. 149–150).

Samek 2007, p. 128). Today, what began as a call for advocacy is more often than not a call for radical, structural change.

It is an important claim in this article that advocacy—to voice support—is often the limit and horizon of social change in librarianship and presumes a sovereign authority whom one is trying to convince of a certain course of action (e.g. “having a seat at the table”). Social change, on the other hand is the direct transformation of material and social relations by people themselves without reference to a transcendental sovereign power. This idea is prominent in many areas of social and political theory, but I draw primarily on autonomist Marxist conceptions of the multitude as a communist form-of-life (see Virno 2004; Hardt and Negri 2004).

When people—including library workers—protested Vancouver Public Library, Toronto Public Library, and Seattle Public Library for renting space³ to transphobic speakers, it was not in the name of greater *advocacy* but of social change, of the challenging and dismantling of institutionalized power structures and structures of oppression. Concerns raised about the close relations between the police and the library in Toronto and Seattle (and in Winnipeg with respect to the punitive security measures implemented by the library in 2019)⁴ connect the push for radical change in libraries to broader movements to defund the police which went mainstream in 2020. The fact that protest—Black protest, Indigenous protest, trans protest—often go beyond debate and discussion cause defenders of the traditional, dominant conception of IF to condemn protesters and critics as anti-democratic censors or uncivil thugs. This predictable response is built into the philosophy of Intellectual Freedom itself.

Philosophies of Intellectual Freedom

The common philosophical lineage of Intellectual Freedom is that of liberalism. John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859) and John Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* (1971) are the two most important texts in this tradition, but writings by Locke (in particular the “Letter Concerning Toleration” (1689)), Habermas (in particular the work on communicative reason and the public sphere), and Gramsci round out the philosophical landscape.⁵

The liberal perspective tends to understand IF as both a condition and an outcome of

3 It is important to note that these libraries *rent* space rather than simply providing “room bookings”. On the one hand, this makes it a private financial transaction rather than a matter of the public good. On the other hand, in the Canadian context, it places the activity outside the statutory public library mandate.

4 For an account of these controversies in Canadian librarianship see Popowich (2021).

5 For a detailed overview of this philosophical lineage, see Alfino and Koltutsky (2015).

democratic society. In her 2001 edited collection *Libraries and Democracy: The Cornerstone of Liberty*, former ALA president Nancy Kranich put this perspective concisely:

Democracies need libraries. An informed public constitutes the foundation of a democracy; after all, democracies are about discourse—discourse among the people. If a free society is to survive, it must ensure the preservation of its records and provide free and open access to this information to all its citizens. It must ensure that citizens have the resources to develop the information literacy skills necessary to participate in the democratic process. It must allow unfettered dialogue and guarantee freedom of expression. Libraries deepen the foundation of democracy in our communities. (Kranich 2001, p. v)

The emphasis on “discourse” is a hallmark of the liberal tradition. Given the prevalence of “discourse” in various postmodern and critical theories—Michel Foucault’s for example, or Norman Fairclough’s *Critical Discourse Analysis*—it is important to understand what it means in the sense Kranich is using it. For Fairclough, “discourse is language, but it is not just language” (Fairclough 2015, p. 8). Rather, it is “social practice determined by social structures” (p. 51). For liberalism, however, language is in some sense not social but individual: we may learn language from others, but we freely and individually choose what to say; “Discourse” in this sense then is merely the speech that takes place between isolated individuals (in the 19th century, Kranich might have used the term “intercourse” between speakers rather than discourse). A major goal of this article is to challenge this individualistic view of language and to extend the social understanding of discourse to Intellectual Freedom itself.

The liberal, individualistic, conception of language forms the basis for many of the philosophical foundations of Intellectual Freedom. For Mill, for example, discussion and debate had clear effects on true, partly true, and wrong opinions. Wrong or partly true opinions can only be corrected through vigorous and open debate. Mill writes: “it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied” (Mill 1991, p. 69). But even true opinions, if not subject to debate and discussion, will only be held as received opinion (what Mill calls “prejudice”), rather than rationally understood. In this case, Mill argues, “the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct”. A corollary of all this is that silenced opinion may very well be true, and we would not know it unless the holder of the opinion is free to express it. For Wittgenstein, as we will see, the

idea that *truth* or *meaning* outside language itself can be arrived at is a mistake.

The truth, in Mill's utilitarian view, is good because it is *useful*, and freedom of expression is required to get at the truth. For Rawls, on the other hand, freedom of expression is required for *fairness*. Rawls provides two basic principles to support his concept of justice as fairness. The first of these, the principle of equality of opportunity, states that "similarly endowed and motivated" citizens "should have roughly the same chance of attaining political authority irrespective of their economic and social class" (Rawls 1999, p. 197). This principle entails the equal distribution of rights, including the rights we now call freedom of expression/intellectual freedom.

For Rawls, "we may take for granted that a democratic regime presupposes freedom of speech and assembly, and liberty of thought and conscience" in order to make possible the first principle of justice. But in addition to that, Rawls argues, these liberties are necessary in order for politics to be rational. Here Rawls explicitly follows Mill, arguing that "the more reasonable course" in politics is likely to be rejected in favour of irrational (wrong or partly true or biased) opinions. Rawls writes:

All citizens should have the means to be informed about political issues. They should be in a position to assess how proposals affect their well-being and which policies advance their conception of the public good. Moreover, they should have a fair chance to add alternative proposals to the agenda for political discussion. The liberties protected by the principle of participation lose much of their value whenever those who have greater private means are permitted to use their advantages to control the course of public debate. (Rawls 1999, p. 198)

This Mills-Rawls view of IF is common in the library literature, often complemented by reference to the "communicative rationality" of Habermas which makes possible a properly functioning public sphere (see, for example, Buschman 2003; 2014), or to a Gramscian theory of hegemony, which makes explicit Rawls' warning about the possibility of controlling public debate (Raber 2014). However, generally speaking, library discourse on Intellectual Freedom takes much of this philosophical lineage for granted. Paul Sturges writing on Intellectual Freedom and democracy in 2016 concludes that

the library essentially functions as an intellectual freedom institution... [T]he knowledge which users obtain and the ideas they develop in the library are capable of being put to public use in democratic activity... [B]y nurturing users who might become well-informed activists and leaders, or at least not hindering them, the

library serves not only intellectual freedom but the democratic process itself.
(Sturges 2016, p. 176)

Similarly, James Turk writing for the Ryerson Centre for Free Expression makes the claim that “democracy depends on the freedom of everyone in society to participate in an ongoing public conversation about what is legitimate and what is illegitimate” and concludes that “if we authorize censorship by the state and public bodies in the name of equality—to protect marginalized minorities—we have a problem involving who decides what expression to suppress” (Turk 2019). The general idea here is that freedom of expression—intellectual freedom in libraries—is necessary for the fair and equal participation in arriving at the truth, and that both this participation and the truth are necessary for the continuation of democracy. But to what extent can any expression or intellectual activity be considered “free” at all? In many ways, this is the question at the heart of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy.

I have dwelt on this issue at some length in order to make the point that, whether or not the societies they describe are actually “democracies”, liberal theorists from Mill to Habermas have understood democracy to be contingent upon free and open debate in order to arrive at the truth (or, in Rawls’ term, the “most rational” political proposals conducive to justice). Free and open debate can be justified both in terms of its ability to purify truth from error and in terms of equal participation. Nonetheless, the foundational proposition here is that there is “truth” that can be arrived at through debate, discourse, discussion, or conversation. (I am focusing here on the question of language as a social rather than an individual phenomenon, but the critique applies to Intellectual Freedom more broadly. This article is part of a larger project challenging the individualistic foundations of Intellectual Freedom in librarianship.)

The proposition that truth could be arrived at through the clear expression of thought and the clash of contrasting opinions was precisely the one Wittgenstein set out to demolish in his *Philosophical Investigations* (posthumously published in 1953).⁶ For Wittgenstein, our traditional understanding of language—as a way of naming things, for example, or of words as definitions, etc.—is wrong. The meaning of words, sentences, etc., only “make sense” in particular concrete situations, against a background of unspoken social relationships, values,

6 In this article I am using the 2nd Edition of *Philosophical Investigations* (Basil Blackwell, 1963). This translation differs a little from the Third (Blackwell, 2001) and Fourth (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) Editions.

and assumptions. Trying to get at a ground of truth through debate or explanation is doomed to failure.

Language and the Social Critique of Intellectual Freedom

For the liberal philosophies of discourse (Mill, Rawls, Habermas, etc.), arriving at the truth or a rational way to proceed politically is a matter of giving reasons for one's beliefs or opinions. Those reasons can be tested through open discussion and either adopted or discarded accordingly. Rawls writes that "mutual respect is shown in several ways: in our willingness to see the situation of others from their point of view, from the perspective of their conception of the good; and in our being prepared to give reasons for our actions whenever the interests of others are materially affected" (Rawls 1999, p. 297). Habermas frames communicative reason in much the same way:

Registering a *validity claim* is not the expression of contingent will; and responding affirmatively to a validity claim is not merely an empirically motivated decision. Both acts, putting forward and recognizing a validity claim, are subject to conventional restrictions, because such a claim can be rejected only by way of criticism and can be defended against a criticism only by refuting it. [...] Validity claims are *internally* connected with reasons and grounds. (Habermas 1984, 301).

For Wittgenstein, however, the giving of reasons only ever leads to more validity claims requiring more reasons. Explanation and reasons are never transparent, language never unambiguously defined or immediately comprehensible:

"But do you really explain to the other person what you yourself understand? Don't you get him to *guess* the essential thing? You give him examples, – but he has to guess their drift, to guess your intention." – Every explanation which I can give myself I give to him too. – "He guesses what I intend" would mean: various interpretations of my explanation come to his mind, and he lights on one of them. So in this case he could ask; and I could and should answer him. (Wittgenstein 1963, §210)

However, "my reasons will soon give out," Wittgenstein continues, "and then I shall act, without reasons" (§211). In a typically striking image, Wittgenstein demonstrates: "When someone whom I am afraid of orders me... I act quickly, with perfect certainty, and the lack of reasons does not trouble me" (§212).

Now, the dominant view of IF argues that freedom of expression is vital in order precisely to counteract the power held by “someone [or some group] whom I am afraid of” (or who is richer, more powerful, more connected, more charismatic, more numerous). But Wittgenstein’s main point is that there is always a moment at which the requesting and giving of reasons must cease, because all linguistic explanation simply leads to more explanation in an infinite regress. There is no solid or transcendental perspective or ground by which to judge the truth or rationality of any explanation.⁷ In the end, “if I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say ‘this is simply what I do’” (§217).

It may seem as though Wittgenstein is proposing a pure relativism brought to an end solely by an individual decision or an action. If this were the case, Wittgenstein could easily be recuperated to the social contract tradition, in which self-determining individuals (who are not called upon to justify themselves or provide reasons) choose to come together to form a society. Social contract theory forms the basis of Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* and continues to provide a basis (often only implicitly) for liberal thought today, but I think Wittgenstein is proposing something different from relativism.

Language, Wittgenstein argues, can only be understood against a background of pre-existing social relations (what he calls a “form of life”).⁸ This form of life is not rationally created or discursively shaped, but produces its own “language-games”, subsets of language which perform different functions and have their own rules. Wittgenstein himself heads off the criticism of relativism:

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?”—It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life. (§241)

The form of life produces our language, and since our language determines how we understand things, the form of life therefore also produces our ways of thinking about and understanding the world.

Considered this way, the debate and discussion at the heart of Intellectual Freedom are debates and discussions around the use of language that reflects an existing form of life. In recent years, controversies around racism or trans rights are often, in fact, arguments over

7 In many ways, Wittgenstein is engaged with the same questions that would occupy poststructuralist philosophers like Derrida a decade later.

8 There is an indication here of how to reconcile Wittgenstein’s philosophy with materialist social theories, such as Marxism.

definitions. For example, when anti-racist language understands “racism” as a structural expression of power, this challenges other definitions of racism as individual prejudice or opinion. Fighting for the “right” definition of racism is, following Wittgenstein’s argument, unlikely to lead to a change in the social structure because the language reflects the social structure rather than the other way around. Debates around the definition of racism reflect social and political tensions and struggles and can help open space for alternative forms of life that we want to achieve, but no amount of debate, disagreement, or consensus building will serve in themselves to transform the racist structures of capitalist society.

The same process takes place around the discursive definition of “woman”. There are strategic and political and rhetorical reasons to insist that trans women are women, but the freedom to “debate” this does not lead to truth, or rational outcomes, or justice, or democracy. Rather, it simply reinforces the form of life in which trans people are denied justice and equality. Transphobic speakers are not debating but are bluntly forcing on their listeners a single image of the world, a single form of life, that they want to protect and defend. Intellectual Freedom becomes, in this case, a shield by which to deflect actual change, miring our discussions in endless debates over language and terminology, endless time-wasting casuistry, while giving platforms to people with particular commitments to keep reinforcing the form of life they want to see. Providing platforms to neo-Nazis or transphobic speakers only deflects our energies into debates around Intellectual Freedom itself, rather than denying them the legitimacy of a library platform, upholding trans rights and Black lives not by debating, but simply by saying, as libraries, “this is what we do”.

Looked at in this way statements such as “Black Lives Matter” and “Trans Rights Are Human Rights” are precisely *not* debates over definitions but are descriptions of a form of life we are committed to.⁹ It is tempting to say that, in this case, libraries should fall back on their “values”. But values are simply more linguistic reasons or grounds. They too reflect the form of life. What is required is to act, and not let the lack of reasons bother us.

However, libraries are institutions, and so this raises the problem of how to act in common. Currently, libraries are hierarchical institutions embedded in other hierarchical institutions (e.g. municipalities and universities). It would be easy to leave the decision to act in the hands of the chief librarian. This would at least have the benefit of destroying once and for all the illusion of libraries as democratic spaces. However, if we are committed to forms of democratic, collective action, then this is a problem we will need to solve. This brings us

9 The reason “All Lives Matter” is such an egregious response is because it attempts to redefine, redescribe, and thereby weaken the commitment to a form of life.

back to language, discussion, and debate again, but with a different goal. Rather than relying on debate and discussion to arrive at “the truth” or to determine a “rational” course of action, such debate could instead focus on how to act, what to change about the form of life in order to produce new social relations and new language.

This also raises the question of Intellectual *Freedom* as such. For if language reflects our form of life, and the exercise of intellectual freedom (freedom of speech, freedom of expression) is always discursively or linguistically constrained, then to what degree is it appropriate to speak of “freedom” at all. Marx himself puts this another way when he calls out the social contract theory of individuals outside society being just as much “an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other” (Marx 1973, p. 84).¹⁰

If the dominant philosophies of Intellectual Freedom rely on language to come to (extralinguistic) truth (Mill), justice (Rawls), or validity (Habermas), Wittgenstein’s perspective suggests this is an impossibility. Language only gives us access to the transitive, human-produced phenomena of the world—this is the basis of Derrida’s famous claim that “there is nothing outside the text” (Derrida 2016, p. 177). Wittgenstein proposes, however, that there *is* an intransitive world beyond the text (the material social relations that compose a form of life).

I have adopted the terms “transitive” and “intransitive” from critical realist Roy Bhaskar. For Bhaskar the “central paradox of science” is that human beings “in their social activity produce knowledge which is a social product” while at the same time that knowledge is “*of* things not produced by [human beings] at all” (Bhaskar 1975, p. 21). Bhaskar calls the first objects of knowledge transitive because, like transitive verbs, they have an object; transitive objects of knowledge have to be known by people. Intransitive objects of knowledge are those natural phenomena and processes which exist in the physical world whether there are any humans there to know them or not. Transitive objects of knowledge

are the raw materials of science—the artificial objects fashioned into items of knowledge by the science of the day. They include the antecedently established facts and theories, paradigms and models, methods and techniques of inquiry available to a particular scientific school or worker. (Bhaskar 1975, p. 21)

Like language, the transitive objects of knowledge are social, and they are all we are able to work with directly. This means that while the intransitive objects of knowledge “are not

¹⁰ See Wittgenstein’s private-language argument beginning at §243.

unknowable, because as a matter of fact quite a bit is known about them” (Bhaskar 1975, p. 22) our understanding of them is produced by our being embedded within the social web of the transitive objects of knowledge. In his discussion of the way transitive and intransitive must be understood in a social, as opposed to a natural, science context, Bhaskar writes:

The human sciences, then, take intransitive objects like any other. But the categorial properties of such objects differ. And among the most important of these differences is the feature that they are themselves an aspect of, and causal agent in, what they seek to explain. (Bhaskar 1998, p. 52)

Thus, while there is no perspective beyond or behind language, while we are always at risk of the “bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (§109), the presence of “intransitives” in society means that we *can* commit to transforming our form of life.¹¹ In this way, while it would certainly disfigure Wittgenstein’s philosophy to press it into the service of Marxism, it seems to me productive to read him in the context of Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “Hitherto, the philosophers have only ever interpreted the world; the point is to change it”. Wittgenstein set himself against the theory that understanding was the same as interpreting (see Tully 2008, p. 41); perhaps it is fitting, then, to read his philosophy from the perspective of a commitment to change.¹²

Wittgenstein’s Method

Up to this point, I have focused on a reading of Wittgenstein that critiques the dominant view of IF derived from the liberalism of Mill and Rawls. But Wittgenstein was intensely concerned with the question of Intellectual Freedom in his own right. The problem of the “bewitchment” of our understanding by language was the object of his philosophical investigations. Our intellect is “captured” by our language, limited by it. Wittgenstein writes that “A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably” (§115). It would be an oversimplification to equate this sense of captivity to the Marxist concept of ideology, though Wittgenstein here shares some of the concerns of later theorists of ideology, such as Louis Althusser.

For Wittgenstein, the meaning of language is in its use. It is pointless to try to come up with ever finer and more correct definitions, more detailed explanations, because “any explanation

11 I have elsewhere (Popowich 2020) framed the problem of intellectual freedom in terms of commitments.

12 Liberal philosophy, of course, refuses the idea of social commitments in favour of “neutral” conceptions of truth and reason. This merely obscures liberalism’s own commitments: private property, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy.

can be misunderstood” (note to page 14e). We can only understand by looking at concrete examples and usages. But in order to *look*, Wittgenstein says, we must remove the “prejudice” of philosophical thinking—“don’t think, but look!” (§66). Here I think Wittgenstein does approach the concept of ideology—the prejudice that allows us to make sense of our form of life—which requires the demystifying process of looking at concrete reality, not to be bewitched by our ideas, our language, or our philosophies. Wittgenstein’s famous remark about bewitchment comes at the end of a passage in which he distinguishes clearly between explanation and description:

[O]ur considerations could not be scientific ones... And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light—that is to say its purpose—from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize these workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have already known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by the means of language. (§109)¹³

Explanation is the defense of Intellectual Freedom by reference to the various Charters of Rights; description is the presence of trans and ally protesters at Toronto and Seattle Public Libraries. Explanation is pointing to Vancouver Public Library’s community values; description is banning the library from Vancouver Pride. Explanation is special pleading for Seattle Public Library winning the *Library Journal* Library of the Year award; description is the Movers and Shakers returning their own awards. Description of what *is* cuts through all the manipulations, casuistry, and sophistry of philosophical debate.

Essentially, “explanation” is an attempt to construct a narrative or discourse—a transitive object of knowledge—as if it were an intransitive—natural, objective—one. We can see this whenever “free speech” issues in libraries are referred to a transcendental piece of legislation like a Charter or Bill of Rights: the libraries’ position on free expression is explained by its narrative or discursive connection to the law understood as an unchallengeable/unchangeable

13 The Fourth Edition reads: “Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language.” Compare this passage with Michael Oakeshott’s description of philosophical reflection as “the adventure of one who seeks to understand in other terms what he already understands” (Oakeshott 1975, vii).

natural phenomenon. Description on the other hand sidesteps this narrative construction to point to what is immediately visible (“don’t think but look!”, §66), not to pretend that we can avoid the bewitching power of language and narrative but to recognize its power and face up to its effects.

What are the lessons to be learned from this? In the first place, Wittgenstein shares with Nietzsche a concern to remove “the prejudices of philosophers”, and I think Wittgenstein’s injunction to look rather than think conforms with Nietzsche’s reminder to live dangerously (Nietzsche 1974, §283). To prioritize knowledge (performing assessments, commissioning studies, reports, etc.) can lead to a kind of quietism where we forget to act or avoid acting in the world, refuse to change the conditions of our language-game or form of life.

However, for Wittgenstein, exposure to and experience in different language-games and forms-of-life is the only way we come to understand and know about the world. The liberal philosophy of Intellectual Freedom thinks that by hearing “both sides” of an issue, what is shared between the two sides will provide the common ground for agreement and consensus. But Wittgenstein reminds us that things may be related without having any point in common. We might say they are related by even being mutually exclusive, for example proclaiming a commitment to trans rights while providing legitimacy for transphobic speakers.¹⁴

Where liberal philosophy derived from Mill and Rawls sees debate and discussion as the way to clarify things and reach the truth, for Wittgenstein, such clarifications are only comparisons which help us to understand the fact that there is no dogmatic or fixed truth that can be reached: “Our clear and simple language-games are not preparatory studies for a future regularization of language... the language-games are rather set up as *objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities” (§130).

This idea provides a germ for a new way of understanding the role of libraries, which I have elsewhere called “mathesis” (Popowich 2019, 269ff). The mathetic library is one which focuses on learning rather than teaching, one in which individual subjects expose themselves to many different and varied ideas safe from the dynamics of power and oppression that hold in public, political engagement. Jacques Rancière’s dictum that “the book is the equality of intelligence” (Rancière 1991, p. 38) stands as a motto for the mathetic library, as a space in which readers can approach or refuse different ways of looking at the world through

14 In a different philosophical context—a different language-game—we would say that these things are dialectically related through contradiction.

exposure to different books¹⁵ on the plane of equality. Because books connect two equal intelligences (that of the book and that of the reader), books represent or express different forms-of-life which are not imposed on the reader through a process of domination, but which can be actively compared to others by the equal intelligence of the reader. Books as linguistic objects are objects of comparison which directly connect the form-of-life that produced the readers language with the form-of-life that produced the book itself. The emancipated form of this relationship—between book and reader as equal intelligences —“sums up the ideal community inscribed in the materiality of things” which Rancière calls “the democracy of the book” (p. 38).

When Wittgenstein writes that “we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison—as, so to speak, a measuring-rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond” (§131), I take *readers themselves* to be such models. Each reader comes to books as their own yardstick, their own point of comparison. The safety of the library, ironically enough, lies in the encouragement to read widely combined with the ability to stop reading at all: “the real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to... we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off” (§133).

But the ability to curate examples applies not only to readers’ subjective choices, but to collections development as well, where we weed out false or inaccurate or dangerous material (for example, outdated medical information). The villain of Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose* states that “the library is testimony to truth and to error” (Eco 2006, p. 151), but as library workers we have processes and procedures to deal with really egregious errors. It is incoherent to throw out such processes and procedures in the name of an absolutist conception of Intellectual Freedom when we rent out space.

Wittgenstein’s method of collecting examples in order to free us from the captivity of a single picture seems to be an argument against deplatforming. But again, in an age of information and bandwidth abundance instead of scarcity, the repetition of a single picture (racist, transphobic, white supremacist) has distorting social and political effects, compounding the weight of the picture, the bewitchment of a single kind of language repeated to us “inexorably”. Indeed, this repetition of a single picture is one of the ways in which populists like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump win elections. One clear example is

15 Needless to say, I interpret “books” broadly.

the demonization of (racially, ethnically, and culturally Other) both in the context of Brexit and in the US anti-Muslim travel-ban and the draconian policies of the American Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency. For both Johnson and Trump the “picture of reality” they insisted on was that “foreigners” were taking jobs and undermining British and American civilization and values. Challenging the inexorable repetition of a single picture by, for example, refusing to rent space to speakers who have TV channels, blogs, podcasts, and print media outlets at their disposal is not deplatforming. Rather it is opening and holding space for specific commitments, specific conceptions of the public good.

A form of Intellectual Freedom appropriate to the mathetic library would take seriously the necessary constraints of our forms of life, our social relations. But it would also recognize that just as there are many possible language games, so there are many possible forms of life. We can change them, and such change can and must be a collective project. In his *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Wittgenstein sums up this possibility concisely: “the sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of philosophical problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and of life, not through a medicine invented by an individual” (Wittgenstein 1983, §23).

For libraries faced with the problem of “free speech”, relying on the transcendental sovereign power of the law—in the form of a Charter of Rights or the First Amendment—while ignoring the very real structures of oppression—transphobia, racism, ableism and more—is to pretend to abdicate social commitments to a more just form-of-life in favour of a spurious neutrality. Even advocacy is only a limited attempt to challenge material power by linguistic means alone (“speaking truth to power”), means which do not threaten the extra-linguistic structures of social power as such. As we have learned from Wittgenstein, there is no neutrality, there is just another language-game. If this is correct, then libraries can safely adopt commitments to particular forms-of-life developed as a collective project of emancipation and progress. To do otherwise is to prioritize individualism and the existing set of capitalist social relations, including transphobia and white supremacy, rather than contributing to real movements of social change.

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