CRITICAL NOTICE

The Undiscovered Wittgenstein
The Twentieth Century’s Most Misunderstood Philosopher
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Reviewed by Derek A. McDougall

Grammar tells what kind of object anything is (Theology as grammar).

This is Investigations § 373. In § 371 we are told that ‘Essence is expressed by grammar’, and in § 374 a claim is made that has by now become familiar from the secondary literature, that ‘The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one couldn’t do. As if there really were an object from which I derive its description, but I were unable to show it to anyone…..’ This, in Wittgenstein’s terms, would be a picture, and the advice he gives is to yield to the picture whilst investigating how it might be applied.

The sort of thing one couldn’t do is represented in philosophy, for example, by the claim that one could never have direct access to the thoughts and feelings of persons other than one’s self; and Wittgenstein proposes that whether one either could have or could not have this kind of access is a confusion. This is the picture that has no application. Yet, insofar as the picture of others having thoughts and feelings in the way that I have is ordinarily no more than a harmless accompaniment of the practice of attributing sensations to ourselves and to others, it is performing no useful role within the practice. Wittgenstein’s insight is to adopt a methodological standpoint from which what would formerly have been assumed to be a philosophical implication of ordinary discourse, becomes a picture incidental to our mastery of a technique within a practice.

Consequently, if the grammar of sensation language is expressed within the practice of talking about our own feelings and those of others, then the distinction between the private and the public, the inner and the outer, or the mental and the physical, gains its sense through the application it acquires within the practice. The reality of what is private as distinct from what is public, is revealed through the use these terms ordinarily have; and the conclusion
to be drawn from this is that any interminable philosophical doubt expressed in wholly general terms, is totally idle, because it arises outwith the contexts in which ordinary questions may be asked about the thoughts and feelings of individuals on specific occasions. Philosophical doubt of this kind results from being misled by a picture which, in a philosophical context, comes to encapsulate what it only appears to mean to attribute thoughts and feelings to others.

It is hardly surprising that if we read what Wittgenstein is saying in the Investigations in this light, then some of the things John Cook wishes to attribute to him about ‘other minds’ or the ‘privacy’ of sensations can seem entirely unobjectionable; yet there are philosophical standpoints Cook attributes to Wittgenstein which are entirely at odds with this presentation. Here is one passage, about Kohler’s view that the perceptual event, recording observed behaviour, contains a man’s excitement, in which Cook may appear to capture Wittgenstein’s outlook:

Then, commenting on the word Kohler used to illustrate his point - the word ‘excitement’, Wittgenstein said: ‘The misconception [is] that this word means something internal as well as something external. And if anyone denies that [the word means something internal], he is misinterpreted as denying inner excitement.’

Had Wittgenstein finished this thought he might have said: ‘In denying that “excitement” means something internal as well as something external, I am rejecting the picture of the inner and the outer ; I am not denying the existence of anything.’ (1)

Cook ends with a reference to Wittgenstein’s earlier comment (2) that ‘In general I do not surmise fear in him - I see it. I do not feel that I am deducing the probable existence of something inside from something outside.’ Feeling excitement is expressed in one’s behaviour, although Cook’s Wittgenstein - as we shall see - is really denying the existence of a kind of private, inner object even in the course of enumerating all the different accompaniments, e.g. palpitations, tingles and flushes that uncontroversially accompany the feeling. In elaborating on his thought that Wittgenstein would
have claimed not to be denying the existence of anything, Cook is prepared to go even further in suggesting that Wittgenstein does not intend to be in conflict with what we would ordinarily say:

To be fair to Wittgenstein, we must not think that he was objecting to the actual use of the word ‘inner’, as in the phrase ‘his inner turmoil’, meaning the conflicted feelings he doesn’t talk about (or seldom allows others to see), which stands in contrast with, for example, ‘He wears his heart on his sleeve’. (3)

Because there is this constant ambivalence arising from what one might be inclined to say about these matters in a philosophical context, and the philosophical implications that may or may not be understood to follow from what is ordinarily said, it is hardly surprising that Cook can often make claims which seem not at all tendentious. Speaking, for example, of Wittgenstein’s remark in his 1931 Lectures that behaviourism must be able to distinguish between real and simulated toothache, Cook goes on to claim:

His solution was to say that the criterion for a man’s having a toothache is that he behaves in a certain manner in certain circumstances and saying, in addition, that there is nothing like a complete list of such circumstances....

Wittgenstein insisted that because he denied that ‘he has toothache’ can be defined in terms of behaviour plus circumstances, he was not a behaviourist. (4)

Whatever variations may have occurred between 1931 and 1951, say - and Cook would argue that Wittgenstein remained a verificationist - the view that the circumstances surrounding a person’s behaviour in a public context, supply the criteria under which we can correctly describe him as suffering from toothache on a particular occasion, is unobjectionable: this background does contribute to our understanding of the meaning of the claim that he is experiencing toothache. The grammar of the concept of toothache is revealed by showing in this way how the term is used.

The significant point is that there is nowhere else to look in order to grasp the meaning of the term.
This, however, is not the conclusion that Cook wishes to draw from his apparently innocent description of Wittgenstein’s account of toothache, for he goes on to argue that what Wittgenstein is saying cannot avoid the imputation of behaviourism:

This is surely tendentious, for he most assuredly did not allow that a man’s toothache is something over and above - or in addition to - his behavior and circumstances......a philosopher does not escape being a reductionist.....simply by declaring that certain words or phrases cannot be defined in terms of certain other words or phrases, for in order to escape being a reductionist a philosopher must not accept the same ontology as a full-fledged reductionist, and by that test Wittgenstein was clearly a behaviorist. (5)

But that a man’s toothache should be anything over and above his behaviour in the appropriate circumstances which supply the background against which we come to understand the concept of toothache, is precisely the misleading picture telling us in philosophy that there is an application for the kind of metaphysical ontology which Wittgenstein repudiated ; and which is evidently crucial to Cook’s argument. If these circumstances contribute towards the meaning of the claim that toothache is being experienced, quite independently of the pictures which may or may not accompany our grasp of the use of the concept, there is no scope for Cook’s ontology.

Repeating his claim in a later footnote, Cook quotes a reply made by C.D. Broad to a remark by Wittgenstein that one cannot believe something for which there can be no verification:

Apparently, Broad said something like this: ‘you cannot know what I am feeling - whether I have toothache, for example, but you cannot deny that if I tell you I have toothache you will pity me, but - and this is my point - you couldn’t pity me for suffering if you did not not believe I am suffering. So here is an example of your believing something that you cannot verify.’ (6)
But all that this need be taken to show is that Broad shares with Cook the conviction that in a philosophical context one’s understanding of what it is for a person other than one’s self to have toothache consists in being party to a metaphysical viewpoint implying the existence of a private experience with an appropriate ontological status; and this is the very picture which Wittgenstein is at pains to renounce. Certainly, as Wittgenstein’s views evolved, it is open to question whether at earlier stages of their development he would have expressed them with this level of sophistication; but if Cora Diamond is correct in thinking that even in the *Tractatus* he believed that becoming acquainted with Bismarck’s toothache is not a matter of reaching out beyond what can be experienced, and if he held an intermediate view to the effect that Bismarck’s having toothache is a matter of his behaving as Wittgenstein would behave in appropriate circumstances, (7) then a move is certainly being made towards a sophisticated interpretation which, in locating our understanding of what it is to attribute sensations and feelings to others within the judgements made within a social practice, finally dispenses altogether with a dubious commitment to either the existence or non-existence of metaphysical objects. Cook, on the other hand, takes Wittgenstein to reify these objects, whilst rejecting them on verificationist grounds.

This has the consequence that the evidence Cook often advances for his behaviourist interpretation, if looked at from another perspective, becomes instead evidence for Wittgenstein’s claim that he is rejecting both behaviourism and dualism as the consequence of an adherence to a misleading picture. Cook quotes Kenny as an example of the kind of approach that simply cannot be right:

Wittgenstein uses the concept of criterion especially to clarify certain problems in the philosophy of mind. Most commonly, in the *Investigations*, a criterion is an observable phenomenon which is, by logical necessity, evidence for a mental state or process which is not itself observable. (8)
Although it is highly unlikely that Kenny would still hold to this rather naive view - naive because with its dubious talk of ‘logical necessity’ and of unobservable processes, it appears to betray a commitment to the very metaphysical objects either whose existence or non-existence Wittgenstein wishes to renounce - Cook claims that if an inner process has an outer behavioural criterion, then it cannot be right (metaphysically) to say that the so-called ‘inner’ process is itself anything other than ‘outer’:

Kenny says that Wittgenstein’s concept of a criterion does not make him a behaviorist. But in fact the whole point of his introducing the concept of criteria was to allow him to be a behaviorist while rejecting the kind of reductionism he had subscribed to in the Tractatus. It allowed him, that is, to remain a behaviorist while dropping the idea that a word such as ‘pain’ or ‘worried’ is definable in terms of behavior alone. (9)

But if we combine what is correct in both the approaches of Kenny and Cook, we can reach the sound conclusion that our understanding of the application of a concept like pain, and so an appreciation of the grammar of the concept, rests not on the results of metaphysical reflection, but on a mastery of the concept within the practice of attributing pain to one’s self and to others; and part of that mastery involves an acquaintance with the criteria employed to determine when others are in pain. From this perspective, far from introducing traditional dichotomies involving the opposition of ontological categories of the kinds that are presupposed in Cook’s account, the distinctions between what is inner and what is outer, private and public, mental and physical, gain their meanings from these ordinary applications within the context of the social practice. Once again, what has traditionally been taken to be an accepted and unquestioned philosophical commitment of ordinary discourse about chairs and tables, or the thoughts and feelings of others, becomes on Wittgenstein’s reading nothing more than a commitment that we are inclined to make when doing philosophy to a wholly
misleading picture which is no more than an incidental accompaniment to our participation in the practice of talking about chairs and tables or the thoughts and feelings of others.

The significant feature of Cook’s presentation, then, is not so much that he fails to appreciate that Wittgenstein can be interpreted in this way. It is rather that everything that he does say about Wittgenstein’s adherence to neutral monism, behaviourism and verificationism, begins with the same basic components from which this presentation can be derived. Yet by retaining an adherence to the traditional ontological categories that Wittgenstein repudiates, Cook avoids any recognition of the radical way in which Wittgenstein can be seen to be turning the investigation around. Quoting from The Blue Book, Cook finds that ‘the common-sense man’, ignorant of all philosophy, is not a realist:

The point is that realists maintain that the commonsense man holds various philosophical beliefs that cannot be verified because they are beliefs about things that are not given in experience, such as beliefs about another person’s mind or a table on the far side of one’s sense-data. So the issue, as Wittgenstein saw it, was over the proper interpretation of various things that are said in the common affairs of life. (10)

So far, this is a fair assessment of how what we ordinarily say is related to the philosophical problems with which Wittgenstein grappled, and in itself does not necessarily lead to the assessment that Cook gives of Wittgenstein’s approach to these problems; for this assessment has Wittgenstein accepting Cook’s terms of the debate, whereas he actually says in the passage to which Cook refers, not that the common sense man is not a realist, but that he is as far from realism as from idealism. Yet Cook has Wittgenstein making a philosophical proposal:

And phenomenalism (including phenomenalistic idealism) is one answer to that. It declares that the propositions of ordinary language are not about things that transcend experience, they are about what
is given in immediate experience. And what proves that this is so? It is proved by the fact that on a realist interpretation those things we allegedly say could not be verified and so would be perfectly meaningless. Or, turning the matter around, if we ask what proves that the phenomenalist interpretation is correct, Wittgenstein’s answer would be that it is proved by the fact that we can verify (have criteria for) the things we say in ordinary language about other people and ‘external’ objects. (11)

This point arises again and again throughout Cook’s presentation. Rejecting M. & J. Hintikka’s claim that, a propos of § 293, the beetle in the box does not disappear except when we try to speak of it outwith a public framework, so that on their view Wittgenstein rejects a Cartesian semantics but not a Cartesian metaphysics, Cook argues that Wittgenstein denied the existence of the private objects underlying the Hintikka’s account. (12) It is for this reason, according to Cook, that Wittgenstein believes his neutral monism to be capable of doing all the work required. The point surfaces again in a later section in which he returns to The Beetle in The Box (§ 293), where, according to Cook, commentators....

.............fail to realise that the beetles in the boxes are the analogue not for sensations but only for sensations as dualists (mistakenly) conceive of them. Because commentators have failed to realise this, they imagine that the beetle-in-the-box passage is confirmation that Wittgenstein held sensations to be private, which then leads to disputes over what he meant by saying that ‘the object drops out’.

On the one hand, there are those who take Wittgenstein to be saying that we all have private sensations, (beetles in our boxes), but can’t talk about them ; on the other hand there are those who take him to be saying
we can, and do talk about them, (but we do not name them by means of private ostensive definitions). This disagreement, however, would not arise if it were recognised that Wittgenstein was a neutral monist, for it would be understood that the premise of the beetle-in-the-box argument, namely, that sensations are private, is not one that Wittgenstein himself accepted. So both parties to this dispute are mistaken; neither interpretation captures Wittgenstein’s meaning. (13)

But, of course, if we take Wittgenstein to be repudiating the metaphysical theses that there either are or are not private objects in the sense espoused by Cook, so that the very notion of privacy which is a common feature of our attribution of sensations to ourselves and to others becomes a function of the role of the grammar of sensation language within the social practice, then we have an entirely new way of interpreting these passages that points the investigation in a different direction. We can then also recognise in what respects Cook has already to hand the components underlying this approach even in the course of adhering to traditional oppositions involving those distinctions between ontological categories, inner / outer, private / public, that are central to his attribution to Wittgenstein of the philosophical standpoint of neutral monism. On the interpretation given here, Wittgenstein most certainly would not have regarded himself as being party to a commitment of this kind. In this respect, the view to be extracted from the Investigations is at the very least a subtle refinement of anything to be found in The Blue Book, and certainly advances considerably on some of the earlier passages Cook is often given to cite, indicating a development in his ideas from 1929 onwards that Cook refuses to allow.

Readers who have followed Cook’s re-orientation in his interpretation of Wittgenstein as presented in what has now become a total of three volumes - a fourth is currently in preparation - (14) will be familiar with the factors which have served to lead him towards a reading diametrically opposed to what he took for granted in earlier papers like ‘Human Beings’ and ‘Wittgenstein on Privacy’ (15) both of which date from the 1960’s.
The re-orientation is radical in the extreme, and for Cook himself is a matter of more than merely academic interest:

Some years ago, upon realising that in my attempts to defend Wittgenstein’s philosophy I had been cheating both myself and my students, I took his advice and quit.

In the intervening years I have gradually come to recognise the depth of the ruts in which my thinking had been stuck and how naive I had been in defending Wittgenstein’s views. The chapters that follow reflect some of what I have learned while climbing out of my ruts. I offer them here in the hope that they might help to liberate others as the writing of them helped me. (16)

For those who are familiar with Cook’s first two books, however, it is difficult to see his latest work as a self-contained expression of his ideas, for it is impossible not to bring to bear an awareness of some of the viewpoints expressed in the earlier works, including the all-important chapters on Wittgenstein’s Behaviourism, Following a Rule and the Private Language Argument in Wittgenstein’s Metaphysics. These help to explain why he adopts such an obviously conventional verificationist reading of § 258 and § 270, (17) and such an extreme view of the impossibility of a solitary speaker, regarding language as a logical impossibility for Wittgenstein in the absence of several individuals, (18) with the consequence that there could not be someone keeping a diary in isolation after the extinction of the rest of the human race.

These questionable standpoints have to be balanced, though, by his useful distinction between the three types of Ordinary Language Philosophy presented in Wittgenstein, Empiricism and Language - Standard, Metaphysical and Investigative - and his presentation of Moore as someone who espoused a common sense metaphysics in which there really are physical objects beyond people’s sense data, and other minds behind their bodies, (19) a viewpoint which reveals how far removed Moore’s outlook genuinely is from any that can even remotely be ascribed to
Wittgenstein.

Of even more significance to the understanding of Cook’s new vision, however, is his rejection of seven myths to which he believes many commentators are committed: that the *Tractatus* shows no interest in epistemology, that its simples were not objects of experience, that the objects of the *Tractatus* could not be identified with sense-data, that after his return to philosophy in 1929 Wittgenstein developed an entirely new philosophy in opposition to the *Tractatus*, one that showed considerable sympathy with the work of G.E. Moore, and which for this reason justifies us in regarding him as an ordinary language philosopher in a generally recognised sense; and, lastly, that he was a truly original thinker of unparallelled importance, instead of the fairly common empiricist Cook takes him to be.

These seven myths which Cook takes to be commonly accepted in the secondary literature, are listed in the Introduction to *Wittgenstein’s Metaphysics*, and since the issues they raise turn to a large extent on matters of fairly straightforward scholarship, it will be pretty obvious to most readers how, at least as they concern the *Tractatus*, his claims might be met. The remaining charges are of a different order, since the general tendency would be to side with Cook rather than against him except perhaps in his overall estimation of Wittgenstein’s status as a philosopher. It would not, however, be appropriate to pursue these questions in more detail here because it is more important to understand both how Cook has come to adopt the standpoint he does, and how we can perhaps obtain a better understanding of Wittgenstein by attempting to see in what way Cook already has to hand the ingredients which might have led him to adopt the kind of outlook on the *Investigations* which can be used as a tool to show that his avowedly metaphysical perspective on Wittgenstein’s work is hardly compulsory.

The fact that Cook does approach Wittgenstein with these kinds of presuppositions helps to explain how his readings of certain passages simply fail to engage with Wittgenstein’s method. Take, for example, the 11 pages he devotes to an account of Wittgenstein on James and the well-known remark ‘The word is on the tip of my tongue’. (20) This is intended to be
employing the methods of Cook’s Investigative Ordinary Language approach along
the lines of his mentor Frank Ebersole. According to Cook, Wittgenstein, once again failing to
provide a proper account of the ordinary use of words, gives a behaviourist analysis of this
phrase which denies James’s obviously true claim that what is at stake here is the kind of daily
experience all too familiar to us. Suppose, for example, I claim that the word is on the tip of my
tongue yet it simply fails to arrive no matter how hard I try to recollect it. Then, on Cook’s
view, Wittgenstein would unjustifiably conclude that the word had never been on the tip of my
tongue, because if there genuinely is an experience of having a word on the tip of one’s tongue,
then one could not possibly be wrong about it. Given, however, that one can be mistaken in
saying that the word is on the tip of one’s tongue, it follows according to Wittgenstein that this
phrase cannot designate an experience. But, on the contrary, as Cook argues:

.....we use the phrase on the tip of my tongue when we can’t find
the word but feel ourselves to be on the verge of pronouncing it. It
feels as if the desired word is forming in my mouth.
That after all if why we speak of the word being on the tip of
our tongue and not in our throat or our belly!
So Wittgenstein is simply wrong when he claims that we aren’t
alluding to an experience when we say, ‘The word is on the tip
of my tongue.’ (21)

Cook contrasts this with the kind of example in which he would unhesitatingly
come up with the right word immediately on being asked to do so because in this kind of case it
does not feel as though the word is tantalisingly near at hand. (22) But what does Wittgenstein
actually say? Simply that talking about a word being on the tip of one’s tongue is just a way of
saying that ‘the word which belongs here has escaped me, but I hope to find it soon’. (23) In
short, talking about what is on the tip of one’s tongue is a metaphor, a figure of speech that seems
to vividly capture the feelings that may accompany the kinds of circumstances in which one is at a loss to find the right word although it seems ‘tantalisingly near at hand’. These circumstances for Wittgenstein incorporate special kinds of behaviour and characteristic experiences, but in themselves are are not the meaning of ‘the correct word has escaped me, but I hope to find it soon’. The issue here is not then one of giving either an experiential or a behavioural account of the phrase in question. That is why Wittgenstein rounds off his discussion by commenting that frequently the word does come to hand, although sometimes it may not. But what would it mean if the word that was ‘on the tip of my tongue’ never came? The phrase is not meant to issue a prediction, as Cook takes Wittgenstein to suggest, since its failure to be fulfilled would then imply that it was wrong to use the phrase to begin with. So for Cook this example is yet a further expression of Wittgenstein’s phenomenalism, the denial of mental mechanisms underlying the final recollection of a word blurted out (24), so that there is nothing behind the blurring. Yet if one looks closely at what Wittgenstein is actually doing, it would be much more appropriate to say instead that he is really in the business of questioning the presuppositions that underlie Cook’s criticisms.

Cook continues to question Wittgenstein in chapters beginning with one attributing to him a form of conceptual relativism, but the difference in their methodology comes to a head in chapter 9 of this group in which Cook asks whether there can be objective scientific truths. Here almost everything that Cook claims, can be regarded as a failure to engage with the terms of On Certainty § 105 (25), and the relevance of the role Wittgenstein grants to a system as the background to our thinking in scientific contexts. For some readers, Cook’s reflections on this issue may seem to reach extraordinary levels of misunderstanding, with his usual claim about Wittgenstein’s adherence to neutral monism serving to provide the focus for his further remark that, contrary to what Wittgenstein thinks, Science is not a groundless language-game. But on any reasonable interpretation, this is a clear misrepresentation of Wittgenstein’s intentions in
talking about ‘The groundlessness of our believing’ in On Certainty § 166:

I am not sure what Wittgenstein is here suggesting about science,
but this much is clear: He is saying that we have, without a decisively
good reason, chosen to play the cause-and-effect language-game. What
I am not clear about is this: If, as Wittgenstein claims, science is ‘groundless’,
how are we to understand that steel bridges get built, medicines developed,
disease-resistant strains of wheat produced, and that we have at our
disposal all manner of technological achievements (electric lights,
automobiles, airplanes etc.)? I do not see how to take seriously the idea
that science is merely some sort of ‘world picture.’ (26)

The irony here is that this comes very close to expressing those superstitions about the
role of science that Wittgenstein wishes to renounce. Certainly, Wittgenstein was not without
his own prejudices. We may, for example, find rather amusing both his remark to Drury that
‘Music came to a full stop with Brahms; and even in Brahms I can begin to hear the sound of
machinery’, and the following revelation on the same page that on looking at portraits of
Russell, Freud and Einstein which he compared to portraits of Beethoven, Schubert and
Chopin, he reflected on ‘the terrible degeneration that had come over the human spirit in the
course of only a hundred years’. (27) At the opposite extreme to his apparently anti-scientific
bias, he may also appear to adhere to a questionable art for art’s sake aestheticism in his
favourable reference to the blinding of the architect of St. Basil’s Cathedral by Ivan the Terrible
in order to prevent him from designing anything more beautiful, a remark from which Drury
recoiled with horror (28). Yet in spite of Cook’s claim that Wittgenstein regarded the scientific
world view as an aberration, and of his remarks about being out of step with the civilisation
of his time, this was not, and indeed could not have been an aversion to science per se (29).

Taking a hint from Cook and investing in the kind of ordinary example which he
is often prone to produce, the important point at issue here can be illustrated if one imagines
consulting a volume about British wild birds, in order to find out what materials the crow uses to build its nest: it is made from twigs and branches mixed in with pieces of bone, etc. and lined with wool, hair and grass. What one would never expect to read is that because of the ready availability of new synthetic materials, and the shortage of traditional wood, crows have lately decided to make their future nests from pieces of foamed polystyrene. This, however, would not rule out the possibility that if traditional materials really did become scarce, and polystyrene were prevalent in the environment, some crow somewhere might very well use a piece of it in the course of building a nest, to be copied in the course of time by others, so that after a suitable period it might come to pass that crows in general were constructing their nests primarily from this material.

A relevant comparison for the purpose of grasping Cook’s argument, would allow that whilst there is no objection, say, to the suggestion that manufacturers have decided to use polystyrene rather than paper for packaging in view of cost benefits - since this makes sense within our system - we would never expect to be told, even in a children’s textbook about the history of mankind, that although in the beginning our ancestors used magic and ritual to placate the gods in the course of pursuing their ends, they soon decided on rational grounds that the use of some form of scientific method was far more efficacious in obtaining their required results.

But this is the argument Cook actually uses when, in the course of objecting to Wittgenstein’s approach, he instances South Sea Islanders described by Thomas Gladwin, who, under the tutelage of one of their great navigators, Winin, came to discover that their existing system of supernatural beliefs with its magical rites was performing no useful role whatsoever in the pursuance of their aims and purposes, with the consequence that the tribe was glad to be released from an adherence to what were no more than old and burdensome practices:

Here we see that preliterate people are quite capable of putting their magical practices to the test and concluding that their faith in these practices had been misplaced. In other words, this episode shows that magic is not some ‘system of thinking’ from which people cannot escape
by rational means. Winin and his compatriots did not abandon their old beliefs simply as the result of ‘persuasion’, as Wittgenstein’s account would suggest. On the contrary, they put to a test their belief in the need for magic and concluded on their own that they had been wrong all along. (30)

But this interpretation of the natives’ behaviour depends on the assumption that they are already prepared to adhere to supernatural beliefs and magical practices only if those beliefs and practices play a genuine role in achieving their ends; and this would for Wittgenstein undoubtedly tend to suggest that whatever genuinely expressive role their traditional rites may have played in their society before the arrival of the missionaries, had already been lost to them before Winan supplied the final coup. The idea that the natives are inherently rational beings who try out magical rites or scientific procedures to see if they work before deciding on one or the other is one that for Wittgenstein would have made no sense. The reason for this, once again, is that all confirmation and disconfirmation can only take place within a system. Consequently if the belief of the natives in the power of the gods is not functioning in any particular case as a genuinely verifiable hypothesis, as it certainly is not in those cases where nothing can be taken, experimentally, to show the belief to be false, then we are naturally given to conclude that their beliefs can never change. The reason for this is that there is nothing within their belief-system which could serve to support the radical alteration in their approach that would be required to completely alter their worldview. Short of the intervention of a genius like Winan who forges a new way of looking at things, or of the persuasion by the colonists referred to by Wittgenstein, the system itself, as distinct from beliefs formed inside it, cannot be rationally subject to alteration from within.

Cook, however, is diametrically opposed to this idea because it smacks to him of a fundamental irrationalism, a point he reiterates with his mention of Albert Mhaori Kiki, who was brought up to believe that illness was caused by witches, but who nevertheless
discovered on going to medical college that, by putting his old ideas directly to a test, a proper scientific explanation of disease in terms of the operation of bacteria and viruses leaves no role for witchcraft to perform:

Was his change of mind the result of mere persuasion?

Did he exchange one ‘groundless world picture’ for another?

No. he rejected a traditional belief for which there was no evidence and embraced an empirically grounded understanding of disease that enables doctors to effectively treat people’s illnesses. (31)

But this surely begs the question, when Albert Kiki’s change of direction can clearly be put down, not to his having altered one inappropriate belief on rational grounds for another, but to his having been persuaded to look at matters in an entirely new light. Indeed, for Wittgenstein, it could not be put down to anything else, since for him belief in witchcraft could not have been intended to be a form of verifiable hypothesis when its actual role in the lives of the natives, however it is accounted for, allows it only to redescribe the nature of the phenomena that require to be explained. But Cook completely disagrees:

The cultures in which Kiki and Winin grew up were not cultures in which there was no understanding of cause and effect or of putting beliefs to a test. In fact, preliterate peoples have a great wealth of practical causal knowledge. That they also have magical beliefs is not surprising in view of the many forces of nature.....which they do not understand and over which they have no control. But the fact that magical beliefs reside in people who also have practical causal knowledge makes it understandable that they will, given the right circumstances, abandon those beliefs. (32)
But they are in no position to abandon them unless the circumstances to which Cook refers involve their having been induced to undertake an entirely new way of looking at things, which on Wittgenstein’s view their existing framework per se precludes. Cook’s fear of a slide into irrationalism is given a final expression in his thought that if, for Wittgenstein, the scientific language-game incorporates the rule that ‘every event has a cause’, and if rules are in the final analysis man-made, then instead of being grounded in the nature of reality, so that scientists do inquire after causes because there are causes, we will instead be forced to conclude that playing the scientific language game is purely optional, so that it need not even be played at all:

Wittgenstein makes it look as though there might be people who.........would not recognise anything as a good reason - a decisive reason - for abandoning their traditional beliefs. But this is not the case. So Wittgenstein’s way of representing this matter is quite unfounded. Moreover, it leads to spurious philosophical ideas about science being a ‘world picture’ and about the groundlessness of belief.

In an age where superstition still holds sway over many minds such ideas can only be harmful. (33)

But Cook’s justification for acting as the guardian of reason against the tyranny of unreason on our behalf is totally unfounded. Wittgenstein would understand the objectivity of science to be a function of the aims and methods of science as we understand them to be fulfilled through our participation in those procedures that we take to be integral to the practice of science, like carrying out an experiment, testing a hypothesis, or making a calculation in the course of confirming the validity of a theory. It is through these procedures, after all, that we come to realise the building of his steel bridges, the development of his medicines, and of his disease-resistant strains of wheat. Once again, there is nowhere else in which to find the objectivity of science that Cook feels caused to glorify, for to ground it in his nature of reality is to think ‘that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s
nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it’ (*Investigations* § 114). Cook’s failure to come to terms with Wittgenstein’s approach reveals that he has once again become party to a *picture* in which he takes the *objectivity* of science to consist. But Wittgenstein’s reply is that this picture has no *application* because it is being viewed in isolation from scientific *practice*. It is in this sense that the stable background against which scientific procedures take place is itself a function of the practice of science, a practice which has no ground except insofar as confirmation and disconfirmation occurs within a *system*, a system operating against the background of ‘the groundlessness of our believing’ in § 166 of *On Certainty*. (34)

Cook’s discussion of objective scientific truths extends into his treatment of Wittgenstein’s view of primitive practices, where the ‘instrumentalist’ views of eminent social anthropologist Evans-Pritchard are contrasted with the ‘emotivist’ view of Wittgenstein and Peter Winch, with James George Frazer playing a role in the background as the expositor of a standpoint now superceded in modern research. Wittgenstein is portrayed as having been in certain respects justified in his criticism of Frazer, to be corrected in turn by Beattie with his view that magic is both symbolic and expressive. Insofar as the discussion at this point has all the appearance of a debate in social anthropology, it ceases to have much philosophical interest until Cook points out that magic is resorted to only when people who normally have control over matters involving cause and effect, find themselves in situations where their lack of knowledge renders them helpless in the face of adversity. This, of course, is already pointing towards Cook’s previous claim that magic is practiced only because it is intended to achieve results, encouraging him to once again beg the question against Wittgenstein by asking why, if it were not intended to achieve results, it was eventually abandoned in the face of scientific evidence? (35)

What Cook does miss in this section, however, is any sense of the importance for Wittgenstein of the quite *inexplicable horror* of the scene in which, say, an *effigy* is thrown into a fire. The point is not that nothing could in principle serve to *explain* this reaction. It is rather that *in these circumstances* any explanation is totally beside the point. In the same way, a mother who
asks in despair why her son has died, is not given succour by being told the results of a post mortem examination; just as the inexplicable horror of a scene in which crowds of people are shown being led unknowingly to their deaths in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, would not normally be relieved in any way by the claim that this process followed ineluctably from their failure to meet racial stereotypes set by those who adhered to the Myth of the Aryan Superman. Certainly, in pointing to the irrelevance of any kind of causal or historical explanation in cases where our reaction is paramount to his thinking, Wittgenstein may also be taking it for granted that this reaction is universal amongst mankind, when that may not in fact be the case. Cook on Wittgenstein on primitive ritual, whilst in some respects a continuation of his earlier debate on issues relevant to the notion of the groundlessness of our believing in On Certainty, fails to engage with one of Wittgenstein’s central concerns, even if that concern is at some remove from the philosophical questions that also enter into the discussion. The presuppositions about Wittgenstein’s adherence to neutral monism that underlie Cook’s presentation, continue to colour his interpretation in these sections, as they do when he provides his more in-depth study of Wittgenstein on religious belief.

Yet in these final chapters the quality of his argument is more impressive overall, although at least some of the problems that preoccupy him result from failing to make certain distinctions which, had they been introduced, would have allowed for a more balanced appraisal of the issues tackled. Here is Cook riding what in this context quickly becomes his favourite hobby-horse:

What, then, do orthodox Christians believe? And how does one find out?..........One must ask them or listen to them praying, reciting their creeds, and so on. But if one does this, one hears nothing like what Wittgenstein’s account leads one to expect. Orthodox Christians say they believe in supernatural beings and miraculous events, and they say they believe in life after death. (36)

But far from indulging in the anthropological research Cook believes to be essential to the provision of a correct answer to his query, he notices that Peter Winch is not even inclined
to listen to what religious believers say in the espousal and promotion of their beliefs, preferring rather to provide what may appear to be the result of some kind of objective analysis of the role of their pronouncements within the context of a social practice:

Here I only want to remark that how a term refers has to be understood in the light of its actual application with its surrounding context in the life of its users. I italicise ‘actual’ by way of contrasting what I am talking about

.............with what users of the term may be inclined to say about their application of it if asked. (37)

But anyone who claims to believe, say, in a transcendent God who sent down his only begotten Son to save the world from Sin, a God whose existence he believes he can inductively demonstrate, is not likely to react kindly to being told that he does not really believe what he knows himself to believe, and that what he actually is saying is doing no more than play a role in his life of which, from his point of view, he is completely unaware. Cook understandably introduces examples of evangelical approaches to religion in the course of arguing that Winch’s viewpoint is totally misplaced, stressing instead that what a believer says he believes about God and the scriptures is an essential element in what goes to constitute his faith.

Although there is indeed a genuine difference of opinion here, part of it rests on Cook’s unwillingness to empathise with the kind of approach that sees mankind in Winch’s primitive society looking upon the universe from the beginning with a deeply felt awe, a kind of reverence from which specifically religious feelings and practices may gradually develop. From a perspective of this kind, it is only natural to view belief as a form of social practice in which a child is inculcated into religious ritual and observance via the same kind of teaching that enables him to talk about his own feelings and those of others, and about the varying kinds of objects in the world around him. In this context, what individuals may or may not say about their religious beliefs, if indeed they are inclined to say anything at all, becomes incidental and insignificant relative to the kinds of roles that Winch might be prepared to allocate to religious ritual in the lives of its participants.
But this picture of a primitive society is already one in which the role of individual decision in the matter of religious belief is understood to be incidental to the function of that essentially collective practice in which the natives participate. It is hardly surprising, then, that the very terms of reference governing Winch’s account should predispose him not only to take the role of the practice in the lives of its participants to be of vastly more significance than any individual interpretations that may be thought to be attributable to its believers about the nature of their beliefs, but also that this role should be expressed within a specifically religious language-game with its own criteria and rules.

It is patently obvious, however, that this picture cannot be directly applied to our existing culture, in which religious belief is understood to be a matter for individual decision in which the very interpretation placed upon the doctrines in which he believes is itself a crucial factor affecting a person’s decision to participate in the practice itself. In a culture in which religious belief is regarded primarily, although not exclusively as a matter for individual decision, or perhaps when appropriate for conversion, not only can there be no single role for religious doctrine, but the fact that the way in which an individual interprets the nature of belief becomes a factor in his decision to believe, also rules out any tendency to think that there could be a specifically religious language-game with its own rules and criteria. Here it is almost a foregone conclusion that religious belief should be regarded not as a fundamental characteristic of human life on a par with participation in the practice of talking about our own feelings and those of others, or of referring to a world of physical objects of varying kinds, but as a matter about which, by contrast, there is scope for personal choice in a way in which there can be no scope for personal choice over the question of being a speaker of a public language within the context of a social practice.

This suggests that whilst Winch’s natural tendency to regard religious practice within his primitive societies as a fundamental characteristic of human life on a par with our understanding of ourselves as persons inhabiting a common world, is actively encouraged by his avowely anthropological perspective, this tendency ought to be resisted on philosophical
grounds. Because the anthropologist works against a background in which strictly philosophical questions about the grounding of our understanding of ourselves as persons in a common world do not arise, Winch’s approach to primitive societies tempts him to neglect the basic distinction, central to our understanding of the nature of religious belief within our existing culture, between those fundamental practices in which our participation cannot be a matter of choice, and those - of which religious belief may be regarded as the very paradigm - in which our participation is understood to be primarily a matter of personal commitment following an assessment of relevant options - to include conversion - according to generally recognised criteria.

It is primarily because Cook concentrates upon those contexts in which religious belief is plainly regarded as a commitment to a claim which its adherents take to be literally true in some recognised (metaphysical) sense, that he finds Winch’s, and by implication Wittgenstein’s approach to religion almost impossible to fathom. If, however, we see Cook and Winch coming towards an understanding of religious belief from two entirely different directions, both of which may be equally valid in different contexts, and neither of which could be given a philosophical as distinct from a theological justification, we can obtain a more balanced assessment of what is really important in both of their approaches.

Cook ends his discussion of religious belief with an account of O.K. Bouwsma’s treatment of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, finding once again that both totally misconstrue the language of the scriptures for their own ends, and by implication that Bouwsma in approving of their accounts was equally misguided. Certainly, no one is more qualified than Cook to talk about Bouwsma himself, because Cook was not only a graduate student of Bouwsma’s but actually supervised Bouwsma’s output for intended publication. (38) The questions at stake in this chapter, however, often centre on matters relating to the interpretation of scripture, and to the extent that they do, their significance is theological rather than philosophical. We can gain a better appreciation of Cook’s overall philosophical aim here by returning to the end of his previous chapter, where he comes to pinpoint the central error in Wittgenstein’s treatment of religion:
A point to be aware of in all of this is that Wittgenstein lumped
the problem of religious belief together with the problems of ‘belief’
in other minds, in material objects, and in causation. (39)

Whilst one can understand why Cook should make this claim - because he takes
Wittgenstein throughout to be a neutral monist - it is just not true, as a detailed study of
Wittgenstein’s examples relating to privacy and to other minds clearly shows: his treatment of
these questions is not only distinct in its wholly philosophical approach, with its emphasis on
our becoming confused by pictures of inner and outer, but takes place in an entirely different context
from his treatment of ritual and religion which, often with anthropological overtones, surely had
an influence on the outlook of Peter Winch. What is more significant, however, is that the point
of view of his own that Cook then goes on to outline in opposition to Wittgenstein’s, appears to have
resonances which on any fairly conventional reading are themselves distinctly Wittgensteinian:

There is a serious error in comparing religious belief with
these other matters. In the non-religious cases the philosophical
problem arises only because philosophers have invented peculiar
entities of their own, such as Cartesian ‘bodies’ and ‘sense-data’.
In these cases we have come to see that the philosophers’ peculiar
entities are nothing more than products of confusion. And when we
dismiss those entities, it becomes obvious that it is inappropriate
to speak of our believing in other minds or believing in material
objects..........In other words, the things people say in the ordinary,
nonreligious, course of affairs do not rest on metaphysical
beliefs, and in that sense we can say that they do not hold
metaphysical beliefs, whereas many people do, by contrast,
have religious beliefs. Although a realist account is not an
accurate account of the secular cases (other minds, physical objects),
a realist account is an accurate account of religious belief.

So Wittgensteinians, in rejecting a realist account, are wrong,

and that is why their account is rightly called ‘reductionist’. (40)

But whilst it would be more appropriate to say that there can be no single adequate account of religious belief when belief is a function of the multivarious kinds of reasons and justifications believers may be inclined to give for their beliefs either within or outwith different religious practices, what may seem so extraordinary to the reader is that this passage is coming remarkably close to the interpretation of Wittgenstein already provided in which he rejects as a confusion those ontological dichotomies that Cook takes to be integral to Wittgenstein’s adherence to neutral monism. Or perhaps it is not really so extraordinary after all, if we take it that Cook is now expressing his own view, the view he once attributed to Wittgenstein in his earlier and much admired articles like ‘Human Beings’, but which he later came to think of as something he had only unjustifiably projected onto the former object of his admiration. For, in coming to this realisation, as he admits earlier on in his book, he saw that the views he had been granting to Wittgenstein were only what he had wanted to understand him to be saying. (41)

So Cook ends by expounding views of his own which there is every reason to believe are pointing in the same direction as Wittgenstein’s in his later writings, but which he finds it impossible to apply to Wittgenstein himself. It would be oversimplistic to say that this results solely from his having adopted a rather anachronistic approach to Wittgenstein’s Nachlass; for in essence, a fuller understanding of his position does require a detailed assessment of the two preceding volumes of his commentary. But on the evidence provided here, it would be safe to say that in adopting a too overtly philosophical approach to Wittgenstein in the Philosophical Investigations, he has ended by criticising him in terms of his adherence to a picture of the inner and the outer, the mental and the physical, and the private and the public that in his later writings Wittgenstein - and it would appear Cook himself - is only too clearly at pains to regard as a source of philosophical confusion.
ENDNOTES

(1) Cook, 412.
(3) Cook, 419, Footnote 34.
(4) Cook, 126, Footnote 27.
(6) Cook, 127, Footnote 29.
(9) Cook, 117.
(10) Cook, 119.
(13) Cook, 408 et seq.
(15) Cook, 55, Footnote 14.
(16) Cook, 9.
(19) Cavell, 350.
(20) Cook, 137 et seqq.
(21) Cook, 142 et seq.
(22) Cook *Ibid*.
(24) Cook, 149.
(26) Cook, 252.
(29) Cook, 253.
(30) Cook, 264 et seq.
(34) But is this background arbitrary? *Investigations*, Part II, xii points to an alteration in certain very general facts of nature underlying an alteration in our concepts. But if this requires an alteration in the laws of nature, then why should the existence of humanity continue to be presupposed? Insofar as we have an established causal framework, the idea of alterations to the *laws* of nature makes little *sense*, and this grants them a *special* status in our thinking.
(35) Cook, 296.
(36) Cook, 315.
(39) Cook, 340.
(41) Cook, 55 et seq.
As do most philosophers, Derek McDougall fondly remembers the publication of his very first paper. This was in MIND in 1972. He has, however, continued to worry whether Gilbert Ryle’s comment that “the matter is stated well and almost interestingly” referred more to the quality of its treatment rather than to Ryle’s aversion to the nature of its subject (religious belief). Other papers have appeared in organs including PHILOSOPHY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH and PHILOSOPHIA. His latest, on Wittgenstein, appears in the 2008 edition of JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH.