

From: British Wittgenstein Society [bws@herts.ac.uk]

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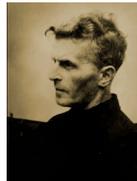
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BWS Newsletter Issue no 9

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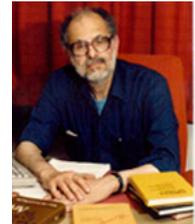
Nota Bene

BWS Autumn 2010 lecture

Was Wittgenstein right to call science a trap?

Professor Frank Cioffi

Digest by [John Preston](#)



In a remark from 1947, published in *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein says:

'It isn't absurd to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end for humanity; that the idea of great progress is a delusion, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge and that mankind, in seeking it, is falling into a trap'.

Should we think, as some do, that this was simply a stupid thing to say?

If Wittgenstein was merely asking 'What has science done for us?', that question can be answered perfectly well. The *form* of

About BWS

BWS is a British focal point for research and exchange of ideas among Wittgenstein scholars and students throughout the world.

This Newsletter will be sent exclusively to members of the BWS, on a regular basis, in order to draw attention to updates on the website, or to share as yet unpublished news.

Wittgenstein's statement, especially the idea that science is a 'trap', is problematic, since he had no alternative intellectual enterprise in mind (he didn't believe in *extra*-scientific knowledge).

Is Wittgenstein's target a straw man? It is not. But to make sense of his remark, we do have to consider who its target might have been. Some people (scientists and philosophers) have tried to give scientific knowledge redemptive powers that it can't have, and science *itself* invites us to give it such prominence and redemptive power. Wittgenstein's remark can be connected with certain penetrating comments on science and the 'problems of life' towards the end of his *Tractatus* (6.4312ff.). These correctly imply that *no* describable state of affairs could confer meaning on life. Scientists such as Sir James Jeans, Richard Dawkins, and Lewis Wolpert, who think that science might confer meaning on life, could not possibly write down propositions from which it would follow that life is meaningful. Scientific descriptions and value-laden descriptions of phenomena are properly autonomous, but sometimes the former have the power to destroy the latter, to undermine our sense of *wonder* at the phenomena.

There is, though, a problem: Wittgenstein did not reserve his derision for those who make outrageous claims on behalf of science. One cannot, in fact, accept his view in its entirety, since he also

manifests what Robert Fogelin has called a 'prejudice against explanation'. This comes out in his remarks on Freud, and on Frazer, where Wittgenstein arbitrarily and wrongly forecloses the empirical direction of investigation. In cases like the 'flowery dream' (Freud) and the Nemi rite of succession (Frazer), Wittgenstein's insistence that our interest is (or should be) in the background which we bring to the events being described, or in *our* reaction to those events, rather than in details of the event itself, is misplaced. His remarks on Frazer can only really be given a '*Flaschenpost*' interpretation: like a message in a bottle, they are cast out in the hope that someone else, similarly attuned, will pick up on them; they cannot be supposed to be directives towards an entire *community* of readers.

Visitors can download an MP3 version of this lecture [on this link](#) (NB 54 Mb download).

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Change of secretary



John Preston will be stepping down as BWS Secretary. We want to thank John for his collaboration and unstinting support ever since the BWS was founded. We are delighted that John will be joining our honorary committee.

Ian Ground is taking over as our new Secretary. Ian is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Sunderland. He is the author of several works in aesthetics and the philosophy of mind, which develop a Wittgensteinian view of such issues as the concept of art and our knowledge of the minds of other animals. He is a member of the British Society for Aesthetics Executive and for many years organised the BSA annual conference.



Ian says: 'I'm delighted- and excited – to be taking up this new role. The BWS has an engaged, outward looking view of Wittgenstein's thought and I'm sure this has been key to its rapid success to date. My immediate plans include developing ways for the Society to support its members' scholarship and putting together ideas for the Society to mark the 60th anniversary of Wittgenstein's death in 2011. And, of course, I hope that members will feel free to contact me with their own ideas for continuing the Society's growth from strength to strength.'

Contact him at: ian.ground@sunderland.ac.uk

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Next conference

The [Fourth BWS Annual Conference](#), on 'Wittgenstein and the Swansea School' on 15-17 July 2011 has moved venue to [Gregynog Conference Centre](#) at the University of Wales.

The conference will be organised by Professor David Cockburn and Dr Mario von der Ruhr and the conference Proceedings will be published in a special issue of *Philosophical Investigations*.

Confirmed speakers so far are:

Brian Davies (Fordham) and Andrew Gleeson (Flinders)
DZ Phillips on God and Evil
Anniken Greve (Tromsø University, Norway): *Rhees and literature*
Rai Gaita (Kings College London; Australian Catholic University): Title TBA
Michel le Du (Strasbourg): *Wittgenstein & Winch on nature and convention*
Lars Hertzberg (Abo Akademi): *Rhees and conversation*
Cora Diamond (Virginia): *Criticism of a form of thought from 'outside' (Dilman, Winch)*
James Conant (Chicago): Title TBA
Olli Lagerspetz (Abo Akademi): *Peter Winch on Political Legitimacy*
Mikel Burley (Leeds): *Mounce on understanding a primitive society*



Further details will be posted on the BWS website when available, and in the next Newsletter.

Please send links to forthcoming conferences or individual academic/public lectures pertaining to Wittgenstein to bws@herts.ac.uk

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The lecture series

BWS has just had its fifth in the lecture series, and next year's are both arranged (though the dates will follow nearer the time). Details are:

[Spring 2011: Professor Sandra Laugier](#)

Title: The Importance of Importance: Cavell and Diamond on ethics

[Autumn 2011: Professor Bernard Harrison](#)

Title: Language, Practice and Human Worlds: Wittgenstein and the Uses of Literary Fiction

All lectures will be followed by a wine reception. These are complimentary, but advance registration is required once the announcement has been sent, so do check back to the website for details.



New videos

Videos of the rest of the July conference are now online

A list of all the lectures that Costas Athanasopoulos has videoed for the BWS is [on this link](#).

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The BWS website

Updates

The events page is constantly updated, so check to see what's new. We are also regularly adding to the links pages.

We've put all the new books on Wittgenstein and related topics back onto one page. You'll need to scroll down to see the earlier ones in the decade, but this year's crop is looking even more healthy than last year's with very nearly 20 books published this year. No recession apparent in this corner of the market.

And don't forget, there might be a book you would like to have offered for review on the reviews page. All you have to do is actually review it.

The Newsletter archive is available for anyone to see - though only members are circulated with the link to the current issue.

The BWS website is designed and maintained by [Jane Dörner](#).

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The British Philosophical Association

BWS members can now join the British Philosophical Association as associate members (£8, instead of £15 for full individual membership -- the same price as unwaged full membership). Associate members get the same book and journal discounts as full members, but without voting rights. You can join by filling in the relevant form in the 'join us' section of the website

at:

http://www.bpa.ac.uk/join_the_bpa

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