

CRITICAL NOTICE

Ludwig Wittgenstein - A Cultural Point of View

Philosophy in the Darkness of this Time

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This book is a further addition to Ashgate's *Wittgensteinian Studies* series. This series, as presented by its editor, Mario von der Ruhr, is not only devoted to 'exploring the more familiar Wittgensteinian themes in the philosophy of language', but also provides 'a centre of excellence' for discussions about 'mathematics, aesthetics, religion and philosophy of the mind'. The present work is split into two parts: its first hundred pages or so are devoted to Wittgenstein's relation to Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, a connection which is intended to capture the book's 'cultural' theme; and its remaining eighty pages are concerned with Wittgenstein's understanding of religious belief, and the continuities and discontinuities in his outlook on this subject that can be discerned by commentators as they see his philosophy develop from an 'earlier' to a 'later' period.

DeAngelis regards himself as making 'a modest breakthrough'. His book certainly does provide 'the fullest treatment of its daunting subject to date' (*Ibid.*, Preface, xi). Most commentators on this subject, however, aware that the 'cultural comments' do not explicitly appear in the major works, are inclined to take care when specifying which claims they are making; and DeAngelis is no exception:

I have claimed that Wittgenstein both seeks to show how philosophers misuse words and also characterizes these misuses in ways that are meant to evoke an image of cultural decline.....I have claimed that Wittgenstein, in the *Investigations*, seeks to both identify and correct the pathologies of thought that lead to philosophical confusion and also, in so doing, to invoke a latent religious point of view – one that he thought was antithetical to the tendencies of his time. (*Ibid.*, Afterword, 179 *et seq.*)

However, this statement is immediately qualified, in what has by now become a rather

familiar way, by those who feel that they have something to say on this subject:

On my understanding of how the cultural component of Wittgenstein's work stands in relation to its philosophical and grammatical component, one can master the philosophical content with little or no appreciation of the cultural intimations. So, while proud to have identified a latent cultural component of Wittgenstein's late thought, one that he deemed important, I am not prepared to claim that an understanding of that component is a requirement for understanding the explicit content of that work – the philosophical, grammatical investigations that are its centerpiece. (*Ibid.*)

Remarking that he may nevertheless be wrong about this, DeAngelis surmises that should some future writer be able to substantiate the claim 'that an appreciation of his opposition to the civilization of his time was somehow a requisite for a full understanding of all, or even many, of the grammatical observations he employed as palliatives to wayward philosophical tendencies' (*Ibid.*) - although he has no reason to think that Wittgenstein took this to be so - it would then constitute a '*major* breakthrough in the interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy'. What is certainly true is that he believes himself to have shown that Wittgenstein 'sought, in his philosophical works, to address, albeit latently, what he described in the *Philosophical Investigations* as "the darkness of this time"' (*Ibid.* 179).

What is not valid, however, is the assumption made by DeAngelis that Wittgenstein's reference to 'the darkness of this time' in the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, must be taken to convey transparently Spenglerian resonances. Far from constituting 'an extraordinary and puzzling remark' (*Ibid.*, *Introduction*, 1), Wittgenstein's expression of doubt about his ability to bring light to his readers in January 1945, is consistent with a natural pessimism that anyone at the time might have felt after having lived through five years of the greatest war in human history. There is simply nothing in the Preface to his book which need lead any reader to suppose that 'the darkness of this time' is a phrase which points to anything beyond the privations suffered by the populations of Europe and Asia during

a period of immense loss of life and deep personal suffering for millions of people. (1)

The point is so obvious that it is hard to see why DeAngelis neglects it. His belief in the 'cultural' relevance of this phrase can have resulted solely from the conviction that because certain similar remarks play this role in other contexts, 'the darkness of this time' as used in this Preface must be doing exactly the same work. He is, in effect, hinting at a comparison between the Preface to this book and the famous Preface to the *Philosophical Remarks* which is usually understood to have 'Spenglerian' or 'cultural' significance (2) (*Ibid.*, 40). The comparison is made explicitly later in the book, where DeAngelis states that both works express a negative attitude towards 'the tendencies of their times', albeit that whereas this is stated explicitly in the Preface to the *Remarks*, as it applies to the *Investigations* it 'requires more work, but a strong case can be made' (*Ibid.*, 31):

A significant body of scattered remarks that Wittgenstein made over the years while he was engaged in the philosophical program that culminated in the *Investigations* provides compelling indications that he saw that work, as he had seen the *Remarks*, as one written in opposition to the spirit of its time. I turn now to the fascinating details (*Ibid.*)

These 'fascinating details', however, which primarily concern what Wittgenstein supposedly shared with Spengler, are based on a remarkable paucity of direct evidence, a point upon which DeAngelis has already had occasion to remark:

There has been speculation, but much less in the way of careful documentation, concerning the nature or extent of Spengler's influence on Wittgenstein. There is very little hard evidence – a few passages from Wittgenstein's various writings published in *Culture and Value* and Drury's accounts of some conversations in which he and Wittgenstein discussed Spengler. These provide the only clues about what Wittgenstein did and did not like in Spengler's work (his regard for Spengler was far from unreserved)

and almost nothing about which of Spengler's ideas might have influenced him. Any attempt to uncover the nature of Spengler's influence on Wittgenstein would require going beyond this direct evidence to the writings of the two thinkers (*Ibid.*, 12 *et seq*).

This leaves Wittgenstein's famous mention of Boltzmann, Hertz, Schopenhauer, Frege, Russell, Kraus, Loos, Weininger, Spengler, and Sraffa (*Culture and Value* 19e) as one of the main reasons for saying that Spengler had some influence on his ideas about civilisation and culture, albeit that this may have amounted to little more than his detecting in some of these writers ways of thinking which he found congenial and which in many respects resembled his own. Direct influence in any strict sense is almost impossible to prove. This is quite apart from the fact that themes of decline, decadence, decay and alienation have become integral to our understanding of *fin de siecle* Vienna, and to our thinking about writers like Kafka, Rilke, Nietzsche, Krauss and Weininger. Notions of decline can be found just as easily in Checkhov. What no one could have known at that time is that they in fact foreshadowed the conflagration that was The Great War, resulting in the total destruction of that Empire of which Vienna was the capital.

Nevertheless, Wittgenstein did have definite things to say about Spengler, and DeAngelis points out that he criticised Spengler's work because, although it embodied genuine insights, it also contained conceptual confusions (*Ibid.*, 24). Although DeAngelis does not put the point in exactly this way, Spengler uses the terms 'culture' and 'civilisation' almost as if they are intended to capture historical necessities of some kind, whereas at this level the most that they would normally be taken to express would be some form of verifiable hypothesis about the direction in which Western civilisation is heading. But Spengler's account of *culture* and *civilisation* could perform no useful scientific role because it would be impossible to disprove, given that these concepts already predetermine the nature of the phenomena which require to be 'explained'. They already provide the spectacles through which the facts of history to be 'accounted for', actually require to be viewed. It would be hardly surprising therefore, if any apparent counter instances to the 'theory' were easily

'explained' in terms of the use of these concepts. They are just *not* scientific in their application. However, if we take Spengler to be providing instead a form of 'perspicuous representation' or 'prototype' of the phenomena under investigation (*Investigations* § 122), his approach can be used to reveal connections and to illuminate the surrounding landscape without the implication that 'this *must* be so'; and it is in this sense - by comparing 'similar' developments in different historical epochs for example - that it may increase our understanding of culture and civilisation.

Yet DeAngelis is occasionally rather inclined to overwork the Spenglerian connection, and this is clearly the case in the following example, where he goes astray in his attempt to reconcile apparently conflicting statements made by Wittgenstein. Following a story recounted by Drury concerning two apparently opposing claims that Wittgenstein makes, DeAngelis is led to ask, of some metaphysician, say: 'Why should an individual who produces writings that represent "the noblest work of the human mind" be given "no more prestige than a plumber"?' He provides the following 'Spenglerian' answer:

Wittgenstein, in speaking of the 'great metaphysical writings of the past' was writing of philosophers whose work, whatever its failures, embodied the spirit of a great culture. In contrast, when speaking of those philosophers who deserve no more prestige than a plumber does, he was thinking of the philosophers of his own time. Such philosophers repeat the mistakes of past philosophers while offering nothing of greatness to counterbalance them. Wittgenstein may even have thought that he, himself, deserved no more prestige than a plumber did. True, he at least hoped to correct philosophy's great mistakes – but he did so, by his own account, by offering truths of an ordinary and mundane sort. Difficult work, to be sure – but then so is that of a plumber (*Ibid.*, 62).

Here DeAngelis is clearly being disingenuous. The fact of the matter is that Wittgenstein's

description of the task of philosophy and of the status to be attributed to the philosopher, is not intended to incorporate any distinction between a period of high culture and a subsequent period of Spenglerian civilisation and decline. Creations which are 'the noblest work of the human mind' like great works of poetry or drama, say, can be misguided when masquerading as works of metaphysics, no matter the cultural background from which they have emerged, for the day-to-day task of the down-to-earth philosopher-as-plumber is always the same, to uproot confusion and to return words from their 'metaphysical' use to their 'everyday' use. Whilst it may be true that Wittgenstein's 'attitude to the metaphysical systems of the past, as represented in this exchange and that described by Drury, is very much like Spengler's in that it both explicitly acknowledges their flaws and, yet, displays an obvious respect for them' (*Ibid.*, 63) the Spenglerian reading is actually redundant. It has little or nothing to say by way of illuminating the 'development' of philosophy as we can describe it in the West over any historical period one may care to mention, *e.g.*, from the Schoolmen to Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and to 19th Century Idealism.

Neither, it is worth pointing out, does it help to illuminate our understanding of the cultural changes that took place from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment to 19th Century Romanticism and to the present day. It would, for example, have no role to play in accounting for the development of English music from its high point in Tallis and Byrd to its relative decline through the period of the Civil War until its resurgence in Purcell, its domination through most of the 18th Century by Handel, and its relative stagnation throughout the 19th until its great renaissance from the 1880's onwards. Certainly, it may be said that the last thing Wittgenstein was interested in was the development of English music. He of course displayed admiration for the work of Beethoven and Mozart, he makes comments about Mendelssohn, and also about Brahms, in whose music he claimed to detect - in a 'Spenglerian' fashion? - the 'sound of machinery'. However, most readers would surely find reason to be sceptical over how Spengler's ideas supposedly relate to cultural changes of this kind.

DeAngelis nevertheless finds very strong resemblances between the work of Spengler and that of Wittgenstein, and in further support of his claim he instances what has become a well-known paper

by Stanley Cavell, 'Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture' in which Cavell discovers a 'Spenglerian valence' in Wittgenstein's method of treating traditional philosophical problems (*Ibid.*, 66 *et seqq*). Cavell's primary aim, as he understands it, is succinctly captured by DeAngelis in the following passage:

Cavell's chief task, then, is to show how Wittgenstein's primary philosophical preoccupation – that of gaining a perspicuous representation of the uses of words in order to identify and correct the misuses of language characteristic of philosophers – is also a preoccupation with a loss of culture embodied in those misuses. Cavell, in effect, seeks to give an account of how Wittgenstein's later philosophical writings fulfill Spengler's final desideratum for a philosophy of civilization.....Cavell's main conclusions are, I believe, original, plausible, and ingenious (*Ibid.*)

If Cavell's reading is as important as DeAngelis believes, it is worth emphasising a point implicit in the account that DeAngelis provides of what Cavell is up to in the relevant passages, *viz.*, that what is to count as a symptom of cultural decline is the typical *philosopher's* misunderstanding of how words are actually used. The actual treatments or 'accounts' that Wittgenstein provides as 'solutions' to problems resulting from this kind of misunderstanding - problems like that of 'other minds', for example - are on the other hand intended to apply to human beings in general, quite independently of their specific cultural situations. So when cave men grunt at other cave men, when Ancient Romans talk to each other, or when Wittgenstein engages with his students, there is a fundamental element in these relationships between human beings, in the most general terms, which is independent of cultural considerations. The sole question at stake in the attempt to discover a 'Spenglerian' element in Wittgenstein's treatment of philosophical problems, is whether his approach can be related to the concepts of *culture* and *civilisation* as Spengler used them, so that his attempts to return words in *philosophy* to their ordinary use can be shown to be

a direct reflection of Spengler's use of these concepts. This point emerges clearly in the following account of what Cavell is about:

..... Wittgenstein sees word use – in its connections with rule-governed language games, social interactions, and a human form of life – as a *cultural* mode.

On such a perspective, one that identifies language as a component of culture, linguistic deviations would also count as cultural deviations.

So for Cavell's Wittgenstein, philosophers' misuses of language, deviations from the rules governing the uses of words, are also deviations from established cultural norms. Every time Wittgenstein writes of disorientation in human language he is, ipso facto, writing of disorientation in human culture (*Ibid.*, 68).

If, however, we take into account what are evidently the very different aims and purposes that motivate Wittgenstein and Spengler, then what DeAngelis often claims to 'discover' may be no more than interesting comparisons which fail to indicate that Spengler had any kind of direct influence on Wittgenstein's work at all. This is entirely compatible with an acceptance of the more general point that whilst Wittgenstein sometimes regards philosophical problems as problems which are universal to human cultures because they arise from features of language which are common, say, both to the Ancient Greeks and to ourselves, it is equally true that certain problems like that of 'other minds' can be said to have had broadly 'cultural' origins because they arose in the 17th Century and after, following the rise of science. They just did not arise at all for Aristotle.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that occasionally DeAngelis is inclined to comment on the highly conjectural nature of his enterprise, as he does when claiming that Wittgenstein's builders in *Investigations* § 2 has strong cultural overtones (*Ibid.*, 89). This interpretation of § 2 follows a fairly long discussion about the famous Rhees *v* Malcolm exchange over Wittgenstein's builders, with Rhees claiming that the builders' language lacks the characteristics of a proper

language, and Malcolm replying with the aid of *Zettel* § 99 that if we see the situation aright, we can make sense of what Wittgenstein is about. The discussion is interesting in its own right, but in the present context its main relevance lies in what DeAngelis makes of its supposedly cultural significance:

My suggestion, then, is that the discussions of Language Game (2) constitute another locus of cultural concern in the *Investigations*. They serve not only to directly engage Wittgenstein's straightforwardly philosophical concerns, but, also, to confront – less directly, by way of image and evocation – the form of his own civilization.....If I am right that Language Game (2) connects with Wittgenstein's cultural concerns, then it also connects with Spengler's influence upon Wittgenstein (*Ibid.*, 89).

'Spengler's influence upon Wittgenstein' arises in this context once again because of the Preface to *Philosophical Remarks*, yet it is at precisely this point that DeAngelis is prompted to comment on the conjectural nature of his proposal: readers may find that they readily agree with the suggestion that the 'unreflective building' commented upon in that Preface is carrying too much weight if thought to directly connect to the blind and vacant activities of the builders in § 2. Indeed, the doubts that DeAngelis associates with his suggestions about the 'cultural' role of the builders clearly emerge, if only implicitly, in his final statement about them:

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein never mentions the blind, unreflective building that he had previously identified as the form of his civilization. Against this, the builders' activities invoke it by way of analogy. They intimate, absorb, realize, or embody what we know Wittgenstein had seen to be the most characteristic negative aspect of the civilized time in which he wrote (*Ibid.*, 92).

If this sounds only too speculative, the claims made concerning the ‘cultural’ relevance of the private language sections of the *Investigations* (§§ 243 -315) seem even more so, as the following comments regarding the infamous ‘private linguist’ of § 258 clearly indicate:

Could this not have been for Wittgenstein a nightmare vision – a Spenglerian caricature – which represents the conditions of culture giving way entirely to the very worst conditions of civilization? It depicts a situation in which an individual’s alienation from his community is so complete that meaningful communication is no longer even possible. In it, the minimal agreement between individuals necessary to talk sense has been abandoned. The conditions of a civilized time, in which, say, artistic communication is no longer possible, have worsened to the point where even ordinary communication is no longer possible.....I am contending, then, that Wittgenstein’s remarks on private language were intended to combat not only a mistaken picture of the functioning of sensation language but also, more indirectly, the tendencies of his time – what he refers to in the Preface of the *Investigations* as ‘the darkness of this time’ (*Ibid.*, 99).

But this is a phrase, as used in that context, which there is no reason at all to associate with a Spenglerian *decline* from a period of *culture* into one of *civilisation*. In the eight pages he devotes to them, DeAngelis provides what is at least an adequate treatment of the sections on privacy, although it is quite obvious that his real reason for discussing them at all is to show how they may be taken to have ‘cultural’ relevance:

It is also unclear just why Wittgenstein believes that there is no criterion for ‘he remembered the connection correctly’ or how exactly that claim should be understood. One suggestion about

this specific issue that has been especially influential, and will prove useful for my purposes, is worthy of special mention. First articulated publicly by Saul Kripke in his seminal book, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, the suggestion has been taken up by many commentators. (*Ibid.*, 96).

With supposedly Kripkean notions of *rules* and *social agreement* clearly in mind - although DeAngelis is careful to point out that he is giving little more than a general summary of what Kripke is actually saying - it is a short step to the conclusion at which he wishes to arrive, *viz.*, that the 'cultural significance of these philosophical observations is that they direct the reader's attention to what is natural, what is shared, to social agreement and cohesion, and to community. All these, of course, are important features of the Spenglerian conception of a culture which impacted upon Wittgenstein' (*Ibid.*, 98). These comments are made with such gay abandon that the reader will either be inclined to admire them for their audacity, or be struck dumb by the transparent lack of *real* evidence offered in their support: 'one might say that Wittgenstein's account of our common language of sensations serves as a "homologous form of" or "an interpretation of" a Spenglerian image of a culture' (*Ibid.*).

The discussion of Wittgenstein on religious belief provides a substantial improvement over these speculative sections, and begins with the claim that the oracular proclamations of the *Tractatus* reveal to us that 'the things which religious discourse would need to express lie outside the Tractarian boundary of what *can be* meaningfully expressed' (*Ibid.*, 104). Emphasising that in the later 'Lecture on Ethics' this oracular tone is replaced by a personal and biographical approach which reveals that Wittgenstein desperately wishes to express what cannot be expressed about 'absolute value', DeAngelis calls our attention to the two examples which Wittgenstein provides of experiences that are deeply important to him. The first is his *wonder at the existence of the world*, and the second is his experience of feeling *absolutely safe*. But even to attempt to express what Wittgenstein regards at this stage as tendencies of his own mind and of the human mind more

generally which he greatly admires, is to run against the boundaries of language. It is to attempt to 'describe' a world of 'absolute value' or of religious or ethical 'fact' which lies outside the field in which genuine factual statements can actually be made. Consequently, this attempt to 'run against the walls of our cage' is actually hopeless because the desire to say something about the 'absolute good' or the 'ultimate meaning of life' cannot be taken to add to our factual knowledge in any sense whatsoever.

This would appear to raise the question whether these ethical and religious 'statements' might not be performing a different kind of role altogether from factual statements, and, generally speaking, this is the account that DeAngelis provides of the alteration in approach adopted by Wittgenstein in the *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (*Ibid.*, 114 *et seqq*). According to DeAngelis, Wittgenstein argues that surface similarities between religious and factual statements, serve to hide their *totally* different roles. However, whilst he is generally sympathetic towards 'fideistic' accounts of religious belief that see it as wholly self-contained and immune from 'rational' criticism, DeAngelis wishes to draw our attention to a certain tension in Wittgenstein's outlook that he understands to be consequent upon the inability or unwillingness that Wittgenstein reveals to *express* religious sentiments: this follows from the fact that he pictures himself as living in a period of 'Spenglerian' cultural decline.

Taking as an example Wittgenstein's remark that his wish to dedicate his book to 'the glory of God' would nowadays be regarded as the mouthings of a cheat, because it would almost automatically be misunderstood, DeAngelis interprets this 'puzzling passage' in Spenglerian terms: although these sentiments would be properly expressed and understood at a time of high culture, 'I am suggesting that religious discourse, for Wittgenstein, was becoming increasingly problematic as the cultural background against which it gained its meaning slowly disappeared in consequence of Western culture devolving into Western civilization' (*Ibid.*, 123). Whatever one thinks about this, DeAngelis nevertheless provides a helpful summary of the changes he detects in Wittgenstein's understanding of religion from the 'earlier' to the 'later' philosophy:

The idea that there is something about religion that defies significant expression always appealed to Wittgenstein. In his early work – in the *Tractatus* and the “Lecture on Ethics” – he had a most radical view of the matter. In those works, he held that any attempt to express anything of or about religion in words must result in nonsense.....What I am suggesting is that the later view...was quite different. He continued to hold that there is something deeply problematic about religious expression, but the diagnosis of the difficulty changes dramatically. Religious expression is problematic not because of necessary limits on expressibility, but only in times of cultural decline (*Ibid.*, 126).

Whilst there are useful comparisons with Spengler to which one can point, the question is whether they amount to much more than this. First of all, there is really nothing very puzzling about the remark that, in a secular age, the dedication of Wittgenstein’s book to the glory of God would be misunderstood. Such a dedication probably would invite comments like ‘ Who does he think he is ? Who is he trying to impress ? Nobody thinks like that any more.....He is out of his mind’ and so on. Secondly, in the ‘Sketch for a Forward’ (*Culture and Value* 6e), Wittgenstein does make a number of comments about a period of ‘high culture’, and one of its characteristics is that an individual is assigned a place in the ‘organisation’ where he is able to work in the spirit of the whole, almost as if he does so anonymously *because* his individual power rests only in the significance of his contribution to that totality, with ‘the best men contributing to the same great end’. An obvious example which comes to mind is the work of artisans building cathedrals during the Middle Ages.

But if this is an example of what constitutes a period of ‘high culture’, then the Renaissance which came to follow it would hardly be regarded in any sense as a period of ‘decline’: it instead constitutes a flowering of the arts and sciences in which individual genius is clearly recognised. The Renaissance does not fit the description of a period like our own, which Wittgenstein describes as one in which we are presented with ‘the unimpressive spectacle of a crowd whose best members work for

purely private ends', a description which in many respects does help to characterise, in the most general terms, a feature of the arts as they are pursued when individual creativity, unrelated to any greater communal purpose, has assumed overwhelming importance.

But why, it may be asked, should that be regarded as such a bad thing? The rise of individualism in the political sphere, and the decline of any form of collectivism, is normally associated with periods in which truly democratic principles are in the ascendant. Consequently, if there are aspects of our civilisation, in an ordinary sense, which have deteriorated relative to certain cultural values that Wittgenstein admired, there are other aspects of our civilisation which have improved as collectivist, non-democratic tendencies have declined. Throughout history, the pendulum can swing from one direction to another in the arts, in politics, in philosophy, and in religion. But this must once again throw doubt on the relevance of the Spenglerian distinction between *culture* and *civilisation*, even if it is one of which, in a broad sense, Wittgenstein, at least as pictured by DeAngelis, may be said to have approved.

Chapter 6 is occupied with the rather general question whether Wittgenstein's late philosophical writings express a religious point of view, and whilst he made a few remarks which would allow this question to be affirmatively answered, once again there is no direct evidence to be obtained from the late works themselves. DeAngelis discusses the problem *via* Norman Malcolm's final book *Ludwig Wittgenstein – A Religious Point of View?* edited by Peter Winch (Routledge, 1993) who provides what DeAngelis regards as surprising and needlessly aggressive criticisms of Malcolm's outlook (*Ibid.*, 138). Whilst the overall discussion has its own level of interest, and is directly concerned with a work, DeAngelis feels, which has failed to obtain the recognition that it deserves, these 27 pages or so are really ancillary to the main 'Spenglerian' thrust of the book.

The same cannot be said for the final Chapter 7, which is chiefly occupied with the outlook expressed by Brian C. Clack in his *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion* (Edinburgh Uni. Press, 1999), which DeAngelis characterises as a form of 'Spenglerian apocalyptic atheism':

He sees Wittgenstein as one of those who came to 'accept that the possibility for belief has vanished', while acknowledging that he

was certainly also one of those who would certainly 'mourn its passing'.

Clack attributes to Wittgenstein 'a despairing, apocalyptic atheism', essentially linked to his 'frustrated and bitter recognition that the passionate beauty of the religious life is no longer open to us' (*Ibid.*, 155).

Consequently, 'For Clack's Spengler-influenced Wittgenstein, a high culture has ossified into a megalopolitan civilization in which there is no hope for religion', whereas DeAngelis claims that 'There is ample evidence, indeed an overabundance of textual evidence, that Spengler himself did not believe that a megalopolitan age in which religion is no longer possible was at hand in the West' (*Ibid.*) If this is a point on which there is clear disagreement, between them, DeAngelis nevertheless shares the general interpretation of Wittgenstein's outlook on religious belief that Clack provides:

For Clack's Wittgenstein then, religious language as it is used within a religious community, in sacred texts, and in religious rituals and ceremonies, functions primarily to impose and reinforce a wholehearted commitment to a certain moral life stance. Further, on this view, the 'surface grammar' of religious language imposes a wrong picture of its real grammar, its real function, thus, deceiving the believer about the true nature of what is believed (*Ibid.*, 156).

But this leads Clack to the rather paradoxical conclusion that, as DeAngelis puts it, 'religious belief might in fact be easier to maintain on what Wittgenstein thinks of as the false interpretation of religious language and of religion that its surface grammar imposes on most of us', and this would appear to be a factor which indirectly contributes to Clack's decision that Wittgenstein must have been an atheist. Indeed, Clack for this reason may appear to be implicitly questioning whether Wittgenstein's interpretation of religious belief is correct, given that it is plainly incompatible with the stance that the vast majority of religious believers would actually claim to adopt when they come to explain what it is that they believe. DeAngelis emphasises this

point clearly in a paragraph in which he raises the question whether, according to Wittgenstein, people can be *wrong* about the beliefs to which they actually claim to adhere:

The view Clack correctly attributes to Wittgenstein may seem an implausible and even an arrogant one. Many intelligent people who consider themselves religious believers would assert that their belief is just what Wittgenstein claims religious belief is not. Millions of them would say their belief in God includes the conviction that He *is* an existing being, that He *does* intercede in worldly events (sometimes in response to prayer), that He *does* reward and punish people for their actions, and that most of these rewards and punishments are meted out in an afterlife that stretches temporally beyond biological death. Are such individuals wrong about what they believe? (*Ibid.*)

The answer that DeAngelis provides is that Wittgenstein genuinely does appear to be saying that they are, 'that the *underlying character* of religious belief, *stripped of superstition and correctly understood*, is as he describes it' (*Ibid.*) In saying this, however, he is expressing what in some respects at least cannot be a point of view that can be unproblematically attributed to the Wittgenstein we know. The idea that the religious beliefs of a person or group could *really* be performing a role in their lives independently of their professed understanding of what they are doing, and of what they *believe*, could result solely from an interpretation of their religious behaviour which 'revealed' that their predominant 'accounts' of the meanings of their activities were really superfluous. On this view, these 'accounts' would reduce to an 'icing on the cake' of the genuine *roles* of their religious practices that can be uncovered by the Wittgensteinian philosopher in the course of studying how their words are *used*.

But this could be true, if it could be true at all, only of the activities of some readily isolable group like James Frazer's natives, whose *communal* behaviour and language Wittgenstein could easily interpret in *expressive* rather than *descriptive* terms. In the context of our complex Western society, religious belief has become, rightly or wrongly, largely a matter for *individual*, personal *decision* based on an assessment of various factors, which may very well include a willingness to *believe* in life

after death, in a Last Judgement and in a personal God, *etc.* In these circumstances, however, there can be no *real* 'underlying character' to religious belief which is independent of the actual reasons and justifications which would-be adherents to the 'Faith' would provide in support of their decision to adopt a certain 'form of life'. Even if we accept that the actual character of religious belief as we understand it today cannot be quite so clear-cut, that it incorporates, for example, elements both of the Frazer *communal* tribal - ritual account, *and* of the *individual* reflective - decision account, the point remains that on this view, Wittgenstein can be seen to be propounding an idealised conception of religious belief and of the function of religious language which he found congenial, one which is in accord with his own *personal* need for salvation from 'sin' as the 'wretched soul' he sometimes understands himself to be (*Culture and Value* 45e). This conclusion is partly echoed in the following passage:

Clack acknowledges Wittgenstein's early fascination with, and inclination toward, religious belief, and comments, 'this inclination is of a somewhat idiosyncratic order, and appears to arise from traits of Wittgenstein's own distinctive character, rather than ... describing a faith which others might plausibly decide to embrace.' This is an appropriate caveat: Wittgenstein's belief, such as it was, seemed indeed to be of a different character – distinctive in nature from that of most believers of his time. Thus, he would not have been dissuaded from belief, as other believers might have been, merely as a consequence of accepting his equally distinctive view of religion and religious discourse (*Ibid.*, 159).

Focussing upon Wittgenstein's 'intriguing but puzzling remark' that 'I am not a religious man, but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view', DeAngelis adopts the view, *contra* Clack, that Wittgenstein 'regarded religion in his time as an endangered, but not extinct form of life' (*Ibid.*, 163). This is partly based on the conclusion: 'There seems little doubt that Spengler fully expected the worst of the decline of the West to take place in the twenty-first and subsequent

centuries. Western decline was only beginning' (*Ibid.*, 166). For those who are not already inclined to take Spengler at all seriously, and that probably includes the vast majority of readers, comments like these will seem merely preposterous. Nevertheless, they offer a major reason why DeAngelis attempts to justify Wittgenstein's supposedly 'clear distinction between 1) his grammatical analysis of religious expression when it functions properly and 2) his Spenglerian cautions that religious expression was being undermined by the civilized tendencies of his time. An appreciation of this distinction provides the best perspective from which to see that Wittgenstein was not an eager proponent of religion in his time' (*Ibid.*, 176). This, as DeAngelis sees it in bringing his book to a close, provides a useful context in which to assess the work of commentators, like D.Z Phillips on Wittgenstein as a religious thinker (*Ibid.*).

William James DeAngelis has produced a comprehensive reading of Wittgenstein on culture and religion as it relates to the work of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of The West*. Leaving its evident deficiencies as a work of proper scholarship aside, it is for the most part a very well written and thought-provoking book - DeAngelis can never be accused of lacking a proper sense of style. A good deal of what he has to say about Wittgenstein on religion, considered apart from its 'Spenglerian' context, is plausible and probably even correct. However, the book does contain a great deal of repetition with too many questions raised, or partly raised and 'to be discussed later on' in future chapters, a method which is simply annoying to the average reader. Given that the book gradually developed over ten years and has in the author's opinion not been published 'too soon' (*Preface*, xii), it would have greatly benefitted from being more concise. It is without question a very useful addition to the literature.

ENDNOTES

- 1) Rupert Read uses the phrase in a conventional way in his 'Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as a War Book', 593-612 (*New Literary History*, 41, 2010), in a paper which in its own way draws 'cultural' ethical and political conclusions from the private language sections (Cf. DeAngelis, *Ibid.* 91 *et seqq.* and this review 10)) which for many readers will equally seem far removed from Wittgenstein's intentions. In Read's words, he is 'pushing the boat out' (*Ibid.*, 608 *et seq.*) to see how far it can be pushed, whereas the more staid of his readers would prefer to see it firmly attached to its moorings.
- 2) Yet this very Preface ('To a Preface', MS 109), as Josef G.F. Rothhaupt shows, has been quite erroneously attached to the *Philosophical Remarks* by Rush Rhees, in which context it performs no useful work and, loses what power it can certainly be argued to regain in the more appropriate setting of what Rothhaupt calls the 'Kringel-Book' for which it was intended and where, as he states, the critique of 'the vast stream of European and American civilisation' is 'omnipresent'. This 'work' has comments on literature, music and culture amongst other things, and demands publication. See Josef G.F. Rothhaupt: 'Wittgenstein at Work: Creation, Selection and Composition of "Remarks"' 51, in *Wittgenstein After His Nachlass* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2010). This does not *seriously* affect what DeAngelis wishes to say given that these remarks on 'culture' remain, wherever they originated.

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, PHILOSOPHIA, THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH (2008) PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS (2010) and ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY (forthcoming late 2012-13).