

DECOLONIZING WITTGENSTEIN

Research Project by João José R. L. de Almeida (from 2022 to the present)

This research has the primary objective of exploring the liberatory – or, if we wish, therapeutic and political – aspects imbued in the philosophical project proposed by Wittgenstein.

What “philosophical project” is this? At what moment, in what passage, in what place in the author’s texts is this work plan formulated in such a solemn and clear manner that we can refer to it without arousing any suspicion or disagreement? Apparently, there is no such clear political project in Wittgenstein. On the contrary, if there is any transparent, clear, immediately understandable, undeniable formulation of some attitude, of some philosophical purpose, there would be no more concrete indication than that outlined in section § 309 of the *Philosophical Investigations*: “What is your aim in philosophy? – To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.” How could a whole “liberatory and political project” be inferred from such an apparently direct and uncommitted proposal? Or what is stated in section § 127 of the PI, where the author declares that “The philosopher’s work is a compilation of reminders for a particular purpose” – how can one think from there of any attitude with a direct appeal to an apparently collective work, dependent on organized actions? Don’t Wittgenstein’s proposals resemble much more a distinctly conservative, timid, intuitive, and strictly individual philosophical project? Didn’t he once say that “A revolutionary is someone who can revolutionize himself?” (MS 165, p. 204). Can we move from this patent, concrete impression to that still so vague, without any direct objective support? Apparently not.

Wittgenstein’s proposals would, at first glance, be bathed in a stoic atmosphere of resignation and accommodation to the inexorable, perhaps even tragic, destiny of every human being. Many people could easily agree with Herbert Marcuse, who points to Wittgenstein’s thought as one of the most insidious examples of stimulating the one-dimensional view prevalent in Western societies, one that robs human beings of creativity and reduces them to conformity and acceptance of the *status quo* (cf. 2002, pp. 182-191). Or, if not, they could agree, at least, with J. C. Nyíri (1982), who explains why if Wittgenstein was not decidedly a supporter of any politics or any conservative theory, he could, nonetheless, be classified as a philosopher with typically conservative “attitude and mentality”.

But, before settling for what we might perceive at first glance, I would like to draw attention to one of the most curious aspects of Wittgenstein’s texts. It is that his thought is capable of accommodating a very large, even exaggerated, number of completely disparate interpretations, and, nevertheless, fully justifiable by the presentation of corroborating excerpts. These textual portions support, at different points and from distinct perspectives, each of these interpretive inequalities. Interpretive multiplication therefore seems to be a distinctive characteristic of the secondary literature on Wittgenstein’s thought. This phenomenon has even been described in different essays: see Biletzki (2003) and Stern (2006). Taken as an observable fact, the discussion of this multiplication of so different Wittgensteins generated, in turn, a new diatribe, this time about his “literary style”, which, again, ventured into multiple interpretations (cf. Pichler, 2007; Kanterian, 2012).

I do not want to cast this investigation into the common pit of infinite ramifications of interpretations concerning the liberatory and political aspects of Wittgenstein’s philosophical project. That is, to let this research project be justified by the simple fitting

of concrete literary excerpts into certain and fabulous hypotheses. But, if we shy away from the interest in thinking for ourselves about his philosophical project, if we conceal the fact that his text inspires us to our own thoughts linked to our own context (cf. PI preface: “I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own.”), we would have no way not to be dragged into the vortex of interpretive proliferation.

To escape, then, this circularity, perhaps it is better to adopt two attitudes: the first, to face this proliferation of interpretations as a natural given of literary texts; and the second, to take each new interpretation based on textual evidence, immersed in context and in its own interests, as the awakening of a new aspect-vision about the same thought. The reasons for this are that literary texts can be seen in our culture as naturally more opaque, since they are distinguished by a variety of formal traits that end up determining some ambiguity, some essential lack of clarity in the expressiveness of the text, traits that reveal the continuous use of metaphors and obscure symbolisms, sometimes a truncated, disordered, and complex writing, unlike perfectly transparent writings, such as everyday descriptions of facts, technical and academic texts, newspaper news, commercial communications, for example (cf. Lamarque, 2014, pp. 9-14).

In this sense, this project aims to approach Wittgenstein’s text in a praxeological manner, that is, as a literary text subject to a multiplicity of interpretations and to the awakening of new aspects, and to carry out creative work on it, without making value judgments about the divergence of interests and interpretations in other perspectives, and without concealing one’s own justifiable purposes at play in this new proposal.

Decolonizing Wittgenstein means, therefore, freeing oneself from external interests in the varied interpretations of his philosophy, and defending one’s own interest in it. In this case, we intend to explore and provide the following three aspects of his thought:

- 1 – A praxeological view of Wittgenstein’s discussions on topics generally taken in the secondary literature as strictly epistemological, psychological, linguistic, logical, and mathematical.
- 2 - A praxeological view of his discussions in connection with a form of creative nihilism, instead of a view, generally taken strictly in the secondary literature, as combating skepticism.
- 3 – A praxeological philosophy of education inspired by these views of Wittgenstein’s work, instead of a generally stereotyped decolonialist view rooted solely on epistemic insubordination.

So, I am using the term “decolonization” above all as a form of turning against “colonial matrices of power” (Mignolo, 2007), as a form of decoupling from a power that unequivocally conditions bodies, mentalities, cultures, and territories, or as an option, an ethical choice for a form of decolonial praxis (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, pp. 211-226). But understood here not as mere “epistemic insubordination”, as it is usually conceived within Mignolo’s program (cf. 2009).

And, since the discussion of Wittgenstein’s thought is also being linked to a form of “colonial matrix of power”, this research project wants to promote a dissociation from forms of control over mentalities and territories in this domain, even if this is just a symbolic territory. So, the name “Wittgenstein” here represents a form of symbolic domain.

At the same time, this research project proposes a creative way to advance its investigations and publications. Being creative means, in this case, approaching problems and difficulties with a significant load of imagination, flexibility and authenticity. It doesn’t mean being truly artistic, but rather putting effort into creating original, unique

ideas from previously unexplored perspectives. Perhaps the most appropriate way to do philosophy praxiologically is one that aligns with Wittgenstein's literary proposition that philosophy "can only be poeticized" (MS 115, p. 30; MS 146, p. 50; MS 120, p. 45r). Sometimes this goes directly against the practical reality of the decolonial movement, which can be also viewed as a symbolic domain often full of clichés and very little creativity (cf. Keet & Rafaely, 2025).

Finally, this research project also argues that active or creative nihilism is the form of philosophical engagement that best explains Wittgenstein's philosophical practice (cf. Edwards, 1990; Bearn, 2024). It also seems to be an effective form of engagement to foster decoupling, delinking, praxeological engagement, ethical commitment, and philosophical imagination, as a meaningful Wittgensteinian philosophical contribution in our context.

References

- Bearn, Gordon (2024). "Overcoming Chagrin in Cavell and Nietzsche". In: Takagi, Shunichi & Zambito, Pascal (eds.). *Wittgenstein and Nietzsche*. New York: Routledge, pp. 238-256.
- Biletzki, Anat (2003). *(Over)Interpreting Wittgenstein*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press.
- Edwards, James (1990). *The Authority of Language. Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and the Threat of Philosophical Nihilism*. Tampa: University of South Florida Press.
- Kanterian, Edward (2012). "Philosophy as Poetry? Reflections on Wittgenstein's Style". In: *Wittgenstein-Studien* 3 (1), pp. 95-132.
- Keet, André & Rafaely, Daniella (2025). "'Beyond' critique: universities, human rights, decolonisation, and the Sustainable Development Goals". In: *Comparative Education*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2025.2463811>.
- Marcuse, Herbert (2002). *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. 2nd Edition. London: Routledge.
- Mignolo, Walter (2007). "Delinking". In: *Cultural Studies* 21(2-3): pp. 449-514). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>.
- ____ (2009). "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom". In: *Theory, Culture & Society* 26(7-8): pp. 159-181. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275>.
- Mignolo, Walter & Walsh, Catherine (2018). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Nyíri, J. C. (1982). "Wittgenstein's Later Work in Relation to Conservatism". In: McGuinness, Brian (ed.). *Wittgenstein and His Times*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp. 44-68.
- Pichler, Alois (2007). "The Interpretation of the Philosophical Investigations: Style, Therapy, Nachlass". In: Kahane, G., Kanterian, E., Kuusela, O. (eds.) (2007). *Wittgenstein and His Interpreters. Essays in Memory of Gordon Baker*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 123-144
- Stern, David (2006). "How Many Wittgensteins?" In: Pichler, A., Säätelä, S. (eds.). *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and His Works*. Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, pp. 205-229.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (2009). *Philosophical Investigations / Philosophische Untersuchungen*. 4th. ed. Translated by Anscombe, E., Hacker, P, and Schulte, J. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.