Wittgenstein as Conservative Deconstructor

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I. Introduction

DECONSTRUCTIVE LITERARY THEORY has been an important part of literary thinking for some time. Belatedly, analytic philosophers are coming to realize that deconstruction has common ground with “analytic” philosophy both in presuppositions and in strategies. This realization typically starts with reading Derrida but leads to an interest in literary theory generally.

Literary thinkers have led some philosophers to read philosophy in the shade of different questions. Some analytic philosophers have thus come to appreciate the possibility of rhetorical readings of philosophical texts and the relevance of such readings for philosophy. More kinds of reading than “getting the argument” are beginning to seem interesting. More directly, there are some parts of the philosophy of language on which literary thinking is vastly more subtle and sophisticated than that of analytic philosophy. On a topic such as metaphor, learning from literary theorists and critics can remove the under-practiced, self-confident naïveté with which philosophers have dealt with figuration.

Among the connections between literary theory and philosophy are very strong affinities between deconstructive thought and the thought of the later Wittgenstein. The single most striking difference is that Wittgenstein does not take his deconstructions to have dramatic consequences outside philosophy. Wittgenstein’s diagnoses of incoherence in philosophical theories seem to leave the application of the deconstructed concepts untouched. I call this Wittgensteinian reaction to the dissolution of a dualism “conservative deconstruction.”

This paper will discuss deconstructive arguments and focus on the question of what follows from a demonstration that a dualism is incoherent. In particular, I show that Wittgenstein’s thinking has important consequences for those who practice various kinds of “reading for contradiction.” In particular, I want to show that some political critiques which use deconstructive arguments can, by adapting Wittgenstein’s conservative deconstructive thinking, avoid the apparently crushing rebuke that their political position uses dichotomies which themselves are subject to deconstruction.
II. Dichotomy in Philosophy

The history of philosophy has numerous examples of the following kind of move: a pair of contrasted terms in ordinary language is extended and adapted to provide an account of a certain kind of phenomenon. The dichotomy represents the actual phenomena as a mixture of both elements in the dichotomy. The sides of the dichotomy are thus, by a systematizing ontological move, projected into a pure case and a generally amorphous "other." Since the concrete phenomenon is supposed to be really a mixture, each side of the dichotomy must be thinkable as conceptually, if not actually, uncontaminated by the other. Examples of such dualisms are the literal versus the metaphorical, rational consequence versus rhetorical connection, cognitive versus "other" meaning, analytic versus synthetic truth, and conceptual scheme versus the material organized by a conceptual scheme.

These distinctions can be understood as descendents of the basic Platonic dichotomy of the middle dialogues. Plato distinguished between the character itself, which is in no way other than its own nature, and an amorphous Other, variously described. Physical things which have a given character have other features and randomnesses besides, due to mixture with the amorphous Otherness. Such physical cases of the character are thus imperfectly and indeterminately of that character. The Forms in the middle dialogues are the pure, uncontaminated cases of which the material instances are more or less corrupt copies. The negative, completely unstructured side of the dichotomy is some kind of Otherness, whose characterization turns out to be a problem.

The dichotomy of Forms and stuff supported and was supported by an epistemological dichotomy. For Plato, knowledge of something is a relation which can only be total.3 If knowledge is to be total, every feature of an object must be known if the object is known. Thus the only objects that can be known are either very simple ones or objects whose features can be grasped in a mathematical way. Since Forms, if they are numbers or ratios, have an infinity of distinct properties, they can be known in the way that the number series is known, by a kind of rational grasp of an infinite totality. But clearly nothing with contingent properties or indeterminacies can be known. The conception of knowledge as a total grasp of the entire object requires that what is known have a deductive, single-focus structure.4 Knowledge is thus domination of utterly perfect entities, while belief and lower forms of awareness are uncompleted grasplings toward incomplete failures to be. Total mastery requires that both the knowing and what
is known be organized deductively around one principle. Such a deductive structure both masters and allows mastery.

Both knowledge and being are conceived in terms of a mathematical structure which can be grasped as a whole even when it is infinitely complex. Greek mathematics was geometrical, and the model is that of a visualizable totality. Such a foundational model does not allow the kind of folding-in on itself that is characteristic of the results of deconstruction discussed below. The self-referential, involuted, invaginated structures deconstruction points out cannot be visualized, since their unlimitedness is different from the masterable infinity of a mathematical progression.

A language which grasped forms would denote logoi. The relations traced among logoi would be logical and would follow the true account of the natures of their signifieds, rather than mere rhetorical and poetical connections of word to word and sentence to sentence. Someone persuaded by logic would be persuaded by the real connections revealed to reason, not by the accidental and irrational connections that obtain at the level of mere physical words.

The distinction between the logical and the rhetorical appears in a pair of distinctions in analytic philosophy which continue the Platonic pattern of deductive mastery and purity versus mixture. These distinctions are those between cognitive meaning and other aspects of language we are tempted to call “meaning,” and that distinction’s supplement, the analytic/synthetic distinction. The analytic/synthetic distinction is driven by the demand that, since truth is determined by both the world and convention, it ought to be possible to separate out the contribution of the world so as to be left with the pure contribution of the language. The logical relationships would then be the relationships among the meanings and could be given a total and complete account.

The distinction between the cognitive meaning of an expression and the emotive, connotative, or “other” meaning of a term is a precondition of the analytic/synthetic distinction. That is, both sides of the analytic/synthetic distinction are themselves components of cognitive, truth-value-determining meaning. That the cognitive can be purified out of concrete language use is yet another instance of the dichotomous, two-factor, theory-building scheme.

The dualisms above have three major features I want to focus on: First, they are foundational. “Foundational” must be explained in terms of the intentions of theory constructors. A foundational dualism is a pair of contraries designed to be the unproblematic components out of which an explanatory scheme is built. These contrary component terms are derived from a descriptive contrast that already
exists in the conceptual equipment of the system builder. A descriptive term and its contrary are extended and generalized. By the characteristic dichotomous move, these expanded terms are taken to divide the phenomenon absolutely and exhaustively into components.

Second, there is a value hierarchy implicit in the dichotomies. The left side of each dichotomy is the positive side and the right side the corrupting or negative side. The pure case of the left side of the dichotomy is typically the state from which the other is taken to have fallen, or relative to which the other is defective. Whether this is of any significance for their real character depends on whether the cognitive meaning/other meaning dichotomy resists deconstruction. If it does not, then the hierarchical aspects of a pattern of thought are as relevant to its evaluation as thought as are its "cognitive," factual parts.

Third, since some of the dichotomies are concerned with the question of what constitutes good grounds for conclusions, the very discussions are reflexive. This format of theory building—which systems built on these dichotomies seek essentially and exclusively—endorses the "Platonic-Formal" kind of connection among beliefs and a corresponding conception of the systematic. Thus the very demand for a certain kind of completeness is itself one side of the dichotomy-format which is at issue. A serious attack on the distinction between logical and rhetorical connection, for instance, will (according to its lights) change criteria for when an attack has succeeded. Both sides of the discussion have this self-referential, question-begging aspect, since the very rules of discourse are among the points at issue.

The central dichotomy for purposes of understanding deconstruction, and this reflexive structure of the debate between theory and deconstructivist argument, is the "cognitive meaning" versus "other" meaning distinction. "Other" here includes virtually all aspects of words, including emotive, rhetorical, metaphorical, historical, phonetic, etymological, and so forth. The related distinction between cognitive connection and other connections among words and sentences is correspondingly diverse on the "other" side. Whether this distinction remains erect after deconstructive attempts to undermine it basically determines what argument and reason-giving are.

III. Strategies of Deconstruction

Deconstruction is a currently appropriate term for the practice in the history of philosophy of arguing that neither pure case of a di-
chotomy makes sense. The condition for a dichotomy to function foundationally is that the pure cases of the sides be coherently describable. A deconstructive argument shows that each of the pure cases in fact presupposes the other half of the dichotomy. Ontologically speaking, the allegedly pure cases of one side must in fact contain the other. So both sides of the dichotomy are in fact impure, and the foundational project cannot succeed.

We can provisionally distinguish two phases of deconstruction as it applies to contemporary philosophy: The first is the rhetorical strategy that applies when one is attacking a standard while using that same standard. In this case, the notion of argument that applies is the then current cognitive meaning standard. Derrida's early writing and some of Quine's and Davidson's work correspond to this model. The second phase of deconstruction applies when the cognitive/other distinction has been abandoned because it has been shown to be logically incoherent. Then the deconstruction need no longer be carried out according to the predeconstructive standards of argument and what counts as incoherence. Once the notion of the “incoherent” is expanded to cover more than “logically incoherent,” “deconstruction” will be likewise expanded to cover the exposure of such broader incoherence. Given an initial success, deconstruction becomes as much a rhetorical practice as a logical one, because it now no longer recognizes that distinction.

There are basically four ways such deconstructive arguments proceed:

First, the philosopher can attempt to show systematically that no dichotomy drawn in the way that a given dichotomy is will work. Such an argument shows that a certain kind of division is in principle defective because a theory employing the dichotomy must presuppose the other side of the dichotomy. Any account of one ineliminably mentions the other, so that the phenomenon cannot coherently be imagined to consist of a mixture of the two components. The difficulty with this strategy, historically, is that the point of view from which one establishes such a conclusion is itself a theory, a foundational, totalizing, conceptual edifice which is itself subject to the same kind of criticism. That is, to show that a given kind of result is in principle impossible, there have to be some strong principles which determine what kinds of conceptual configurations there can be.

Second, a philosopher can try to undercut the dichotomy by showing that what the theory takes to be a natural division is in fact a product of other factors entirely. This shows that a position is ideological, not scientific—that, for instance, economic factors, gender practices, diseased spirits, Freudian phallism, or other extralogical
factors actually motivate a dichotomy. When such an argument shows (in some post-deconstructive sense) a "contradiction" in this ideology, it counts as deconstruction.8 Thinkers arguing in this way often succumb to a temptation to be essentialists and theory builders about their own preferred dichotomy. For instance, to claim that something is ideology and not science supposes that there is something that would be pure of the contaminations by the interests and other factors that constitute an ideology. It is difficult to use a dichotomy to attack another dichotomy without supposing that one's own set of contrast terms can provide a foundational theory.

Third, the most characteristic strategy of deconstruction as practiced by Derrida is to discuss a particular text and show how that text undermines itself, in that the division it is arguing for is implicitly denied in the very text itself. (The use of "implicitly denied" is rhetorically complex here, since it must employ criteria for being implicit which are themselves under discussion.) Such deconstruction does not suppose that there is a well-defined single "kind of view" underlying a whole culture or literature. Such an underlying view would presuppose the division between real meaning (or the essence of a view) and the mere words in which it is put. By attacking only texts, one avoids proposing a theory, dividing rhetoric from logic, and positing the thesis behind the text. The most accessible example of this strategy in Derrida is his treatment of Husserl's notion of the expressive sign.9 There he shows that the account of pure presence in fact presupposes what amount to posittings into the past and future—that is, nonpresence. What makes this accessible is that he uses no modes of persuasion which are not already part of standard philosophical practice. What makes later deconstructions so bizarre is that they operate via new notions of consequence.

Fourth, it is possible to attempt to end dichotomous foundational theorizing by showing that the dichotomy has no basis in what we say. This strategy does not show that the dichotomy misrepresents the "facts" about the language, but that there is no logical compulsion to restructure what we say on the basis of the theory. In the purest case, Wittgensteinian deconstruction, the argument form is basically one of observation of what is actually said when. This strategy transfers the burden of proof to the dichotomizer by denying that the conceptual scheme we have is dichotomous at all. This strategy would deny that "pure case" extrapolation is required by anything other than the illegitimate impulse to theorize. Thus, a given "incoherent" dichotomy is argued to be incoherent only because of an illegitimate oversimplification of an unproblematic practice. The practice itself only appears to have the problems the theory was designed to solve, because the
theory insists on extending concepts past the points where they continue to make sense. The dichotomy itself, as theoretically understood, is an illegitimate projection. Thus, for such a deconstructor, what is deconstructed is not the equipment of thought, but a certain philosophical disease of theorizing. The dichotomy is shown to be incoherent only as extended, not in the form in which it exists in its original habitat.

This is the basic idea of Wittgensteinian deconstruction, the paradigm of the “conservative deconstruction” discussed in the next section. Wittgenstein is not committed to any theory at all, or to any views about the perfection of ordinary language. An “ordinary language” attack on dichotomies which did not itself presuppose foundational, dichotomous accounts of language would concentrate on dichotomies in the philosophy of language, and with understanding the workings of language in a way which avoided theorizing.10

IV. Consequences of Deconstruction: Revolutionary and Conservative

So what if a dichotomy has no pure cases, so that no theory built on the dichotomy can have the kind of simplicity, completeness, and visualizable totality that is hoped for? What follows from a “proof” that the extended and completed dichotomy is incoherent? There are two characteristic positions taken by deconstructors, the revolutionary and the conservative positions.

For the revolutionary, a deconstructed dichotomy should be transcended, discarded completely and replaced by a way of speaking which does not depend on this dichotomy. The incoherence disqualifies the distinction as an acceptable piece of linguistic equipment. (A conscientious deconstructor would ironize the “tool” metaphor, since it both implies choice and implies the independence of tool and user.) The difficulties of “reform” and communication during the process of reform, and of coherence while a reform is being argued, are some of the most interesting topics in deconstructive thought.

The revolutionary position is not that dichotomies can just be abandoned. The apparently radical view that the concepts surrounding a defective dichotomy can just be jettisoned presupposes the dichotomies that deconstruction overturns, and is inconsistent with the notions of concepts and persons and culture that “deconstructive” nondichotomous thought implies. The notion of jettisoning a conceptual scheme supposes that the linguistic is separable from the factual, that there is a way of changing the words and keeping informa-
tion constant. As Davidson has shown, the very notion of a conceptual scheme into which we can put our factual beliefs about social justice or the correct relations among the sexes is incoherent. Barring a Platonic conception of meaning as something which stands outside and links languages across times and cultures, the division into scheme and material organized must be rejected. But rejecting this, and recognizing that we are constituted by and not users of a language, makes rejection of an important part of language paradoxical.

The revolutionary thus has a characteristic difficulty: To dismantle one dichotomy, one must use a language which employs other dichotomies which are similarly defective. To attack a dichotomy in "Platonic" philosophical terms and by Platonic standards is to presuppose other dichotomies. Furthermore, these dichotomies are interconnected, and more or less invade our entire apparatus for thinking about theoretical issues. Thus, given a general project of excising incoherent dichotomies, the target dichotomies cannot be attacked one by one, because they presuppose one another. Really getting beyond a dichotomy and thinking apart from it is to think apart from all dichotomies which cannot be sustained without it, and this would seem to mean thinking in entirely new ways. But to abstain from using all such dichotomies at once is to drop out of the conversation by abandoning the links of understanding which make communication possible.

To eschew "dichotomous" concepts and argument forms is to abandon the formats of argument that are recognized as serious discourse. Strategies such as using terms "under erasure" acknowledge this problem without solving it. The actual result of an acute consciousness of this kind of problem is a kind of ironic philosophy, where the writer is distanced from the conclusions and expressions of the text, hoping to keep at bay the implications of all the terms being used. Such consequences seem to some thinkers to disqualify deconstruction as a tool for those who would change our ways of thinking. The accusation that "You're presupposing the same kind of totality" seems an effective way to force deconstructive arguers into quietistic irony.

Conservative deconstruction shows a way out of such binds. The conservative tactic avoids self-referential incoherence by rejecting the theorizing extension of a dichotomy. Unless a dichotomy is forced to pure cases, uncontaminated by their opposites, incoherences do not show up. But unless we adopt Platonic premises, there are no grounds for supposing that those incoherences are already implicit in ordinary language, waiting, as it were. Unless the logical demand that
a dichotomy be purified, extended, and turned into theory is already there in the true nature of our concepts, the fact that deconstruction shows the incoherence of theorized dichotomies says nothing about the nontheorized concepts. But, of course, there is no "true nature" of concepts beyond what our discussions in their terms construct. So the theorizing impulse is the villain, not the dichotomy. This is the idea behind Wittgenstein's deconstructions and the conclusions he reaches therefrom.

I call this "conservative" deconstruction because it attempts to preserve the patterns of what is said when—that is, the language without which we do not exist. Since dichotomies are a very important organizing part of this language, the dichotomies (or something like them) must be preserved as well. Conservative deconstruction claims that the theory can be removed while the dichotomy is still in place. That is, the supposition is that the theory is inessential to the dichotomy, which can be used in its normal ways without the kind of hyperbole which constitutes philosophical theorizing. According to conservative deconstruction, there is nothing wrong with the dichotomy itself. Rather, the difficulty is with the theorist who insists on pushing the dichotomy past the point where it makes sense. Its failure to make sense is basically the same kind of "presupposition of the opposite" that other deconstructors point out.

For a conservative deconstructor, for instance, the failure to make coherent a principled distinction between the metaphorical and the literal just means that principled distinctions are not required. One need not find a principled distinction between the metaphorical and the literal in order for there to be a difference between more and less literal speech. A principled distinction would derive from a statement of necessary and sufficient conditions embedded in an appropriate complete theory, defining the pure cases from which real world mixtures are derived. Conservative deconstruction tries to preserve the useful dichotomies ("ordinary language is in order") by eschewing the drive to theorize. The theorized and overextended dichotomy is the target of deconstruction, not the dichotomy itself. The overweening Platonistic demand for total vision is something to be cured.

V. Wittgenstein as Conservative Deconstructor

In this section I sketch some of the ways in which the later Wittgenstein shares important views and attitudes about language with Derrida, Quine, and Davidson. I then argue that Wittgenstein's descriptions of language, remarks on what must be and what need not
be, and proscriptions against theorizing constitute a kind of deconstruction. Specifically, I claim that Wittgensteinian deconstruction is conservative deconstruction.

Wittgenstein's thought can be organized around one important suspicion: Wittgenstein is suspicious of the notion of meaning as something behind language. Wittgenstein denies that there is anything providing the Form which various languages express or approximate. Derrida, Davidson, and Quine share this suspicion. For Wittgenstein, language is a kind of aggregate of what people say in specific situations. Such aggregates of events, or practices, are not separable into a component which is the meaning and a component which is the instantiating phonetic or inscriptive stuff.

That fundamental dichotomy is abandoned. There are no such pure cases, any more than there is such a thing as the expression of a piece of music which can be played without the music. There is no basis for believing that actual concrete practices are divisible into rules and behavior shaped by rules, or into meanings and the words that carry them.

The slogan, "the meaning of a word is its use," is not a theory, but a remark about what role "meaning" plays in our language. "For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the term 'meaning' it can be clarified thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." There is no reason to suppose that Wittgenstein thought that this clarification could be systematized into a theory. The whole thrust of the discussion of language-games and forms of life is that the language is not something able to be peeled off from the practices in which it occurs. (As I will argue below, such practices are not constrained by anything like deductive law-codes. Practices are the bottom level of explanation, because there is no representation which is prior to practice-constituted languages, because there are no meanings separate from concrete language.)

Wittgenstein denies the kind of isolation into pure cases that would permit a theory of meaning, a theory of the forms into which natural language words fit. The discussion of language-games illustrates the inseparability of language, meaning, and practice by denying a level of signification behind, beneath, or prior to the concrete language being used.

Wittgenstein calls language-games "games" for complex and intertwined reasons. What counts as a "game," he says, is not to be determined by a common property that links all cases of games. This does not mean that there is a mysterious faculty we acquire that is able to extend this predicate to new cases. Rather, the import is that there need be no criterion for being a game in other terms. Such "other
terms" require a foundation for language which essentially transcends concrete practice.

Wittgenstein's critique, then, should be understood as a deconstruction of the thesis that “game” must have nontrivial, necessary, and sufficient conditions in order to be a coherent term. The demand for common properties, if a common property must be some other property than that of being a game, presupposes views that Derrida, Quine, and Davidson, as well as Wittgenstein, would deny.

I can think of three kinds of grounds for holding that such “illuminating” definitions are required. These all require that accounts be theory-engendering. First, the demand for such illuminating definition may suppose that there is a language which is ontologically more basic than the one we speak, so that “game” must have an account in this basic natural language. Second, the requirement may suppose that “game”’s use must be understood in terms of natural properties which are prior to any language. (Such properties might be natural kinds of sense data, or properties constructed from such.) Third, the demand for common properties and illuminating definitions may suppose that a language really has a hierarchical, interlocked structure which would allow accounts of some of its terms in some of its other terms. Wittgenstein's argument rejects the above suppositions. The inseparability of language and forms of life that Wittgenstein talks about really means that there need be no standards prior to practice or language to which practice and language conform.

A consequence of “game”’s independence from outside constraint is that “language-game” will itself be a term whose application need not have definition in other terms. Without meanings as translinguistic forms which natural languages instantiate, languages are left embedded in and inseparable from practices, from forms of life. Wittgenstein’s conception leaves languages without any pure, uncontaminated external controls. But only on the view that such controls are essential to the workings of practices is this a defect.

The discussion of rules of language and mathematics confirms the above reading of the discussion of language-games. Rules would be the sort of thing which would naturally restrict language if anything could. Wittgenstein argues that rules themselves can really be nothing but practices. There are no external constraints which determine the application of a rule. Rules themselves rest on and are practices and have the kind of justification practices have.

The point about rules can be made by noticing that there is a kind of regress in supposing that we follow rules in order to use language. If rules have semantic content, then rules themselves need to be understood. If the interpretation by which they are understood is deter-
mined by following rules which are themselves to be understood, then there is a regress. As Wittgenstein insists, rules followed as instructions require interpretation. So if we speak of rules of language, they are not instructions, but what we do. Eventually, we have to acquiesce in a practice, to accept a practice without appealing to yet deeper rules which themselves need to be understood by still deeper rules.

All of this is really a consequence of Wittgenstein’s view that all meaning-bearers are languagelike. Nothing semantic determines its own interpretation. The appeal to rules, then, must stop somewhere, given that rules guide by virtue of carrying meaning. Where such appeals stop, the rules cease to be prescriptions that are obeyed and are regularities instead. Only when we resign ourselves to “This is what we do” do we have an end to interpretation. But, realizing that interpretation always ends in a raw appeal to practice, we deconstruct the necessity that practices be guided by rules. Practices cannot stand in need of guidance by rules generally, because the understanding of rules rests on practices.

All of the above remarks about the independence of practices from rules apply only to rules that guide by virtue of the meaning they carry. Wittgenstein need not deny that language practices are thoroughly governed and constrained by natural necessities at some level. But such “rules” do not constrain by virtue of semantic content, and they are not obeyed by being understood. Wittgenstein’s views about language are completely compatible with naturalism and physicalism.13

Wittgenstein does not deny the possibility of natural necessities, as long as it is not supposed that we have some kind of super-natural access to them. Likewise, there is nothing against the mathematization of physics or number theory. He only attacks the notion that there is a kind of certainty which transcends physics; that there are rules whose binding force differs in kind from the binding force that gravity exerts. There are no rules stronger than mere regularities. On the contrary, it was only in contrast to a priori rules that regularities may have seemed “mere” regularities.14

But if there are physical necessities, and physics can be legitimately theorized about, why can there not be a philosophical theory of language and mind? I think Wittgenstein basically shares Davidson’s position in “Mental Events”15 that there is no reason to expect a physical reduction of the workings of language and the intentional, even though there is nothing over and above the workings of natural law.

One reaction to Wittgenstein’s antisystematic thought has been to claim that he holds the extension of “game” to new cases to be random. Such a reading of Wittgenstein’s remarks assumes that only a
criterion of "game" which is somehow not embedded in a language or set of practices can really decide what is what. Similar comments apply to the application of a rule to a new case. The accusation that Wittgenstein believes that we apply such rules "in an unprincipled way" just because we apply them without principles assumes that only a pure rule which stands apart from the language in which it is stated can be an effective rational control. But this is exactly what is at issue in the discussion of what language is and what it must be in order for language to function. If there are no properties or ontological constraints isolable from language, if we cannot separate logoi from rhemata, then there is nothing "mere" about a practice and nothing "mere" about the kind of restriction imposed by a rule enforced "only" because "that's what we do." The fascination of Platonism—what Wittgenstein thinks of his writing as therapy against—is precisely this feeling that only an absolute external form can be an alternative to chaos.

The extended discussions of rules in Wittgenstein's works show the reader that the demand for a kind of Platonic absolute rules is unsatisfiable. There is nothing which could satisfy the demands for an absolute imperative rule which determined what one should do next in a number series or, say, next in an inference. Wittgenstein, in numerous passages in Philosophical Investigations and throughout Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics, undermines the notion that inference is constrained by rules external to and uncontaminated by concrete social practice. That is, if there is any case of an inference procedure which is determined purely by the nature of logic and not by mere practice (which is constrained only by the exigencies of socialization), mathematical rule-following would surely be it. Wittgenstein's strategy here is to try to show that the demand for such constraints is senseless. What, after all, could this absolute constraint be? A compulsion just redescribes how we feel and does not provide this link to a noumenal demand.

Wittgenstein here adopts his characteristic strategy of showing that the theory he opposes is mistaken even in the case in which it is most plausible. This is the very same tactic he uses in discussing the possibility that the extensions of predicates could be determined by the natural characteristics of the subject matter, in isolation from social agreements. In that discussion, the famous "private language argument," he takes sense impressions and sensations as alleged objects which could plausibly be said to be identifiable by virtue of their own nature, if anything could be. He demonstrates that, even in this case, the notion of a rule determined by the subject matter itself is senseless. Thus, by refuting the strongest case, he shows that...
rules for the extension of any kind of predicate are illusory. The “idea” idea is the notion that contents of consciousness are objects whose nature is transparent to consciousness, so that the language of thought, by having tokens designating sensations, could in principle be a language which we create in isolation. The “private language argument” shows this to be an illusion.

Wittgenstein does not hold such views as that “reality is a social construct,” that the world is created or shaped by language, that language is nothing but social practices, or that meaning is nothing but what people say when. To the extent that he draws a conclusion, his conclusion seems to be that none of these items is conceivable in isolation from the others. Thus language is always “contaminated” by practice, practice is always contaminated by language, the world is always contaminated by language, and so forth. Wittgenstein denies that there are pure cases of any sort here. Language use is a thoroughly embedded feature of forms of life, and can no more be separated from these forms of life than the expressiveness with which a piece of music is played can be separated from the act of playing the music.

Wittgensteinian deconstruction does not try to show that the application of a dichotomy misrepresents some facts or leads to a contradiction. Wittgenstein just shows that there is nothing to be said in favor of the dichotomous theory, that the dichotomy is embraced out of a kind of pathological phallic urge, not out of obedience to the facts.

Is this strategy of removing the impulse to theorize sufficiently similar to the tactic of showing inconsistencies that it can be called “deconstruction”? When we consider that Wittgenstein’s discussion is very uncharacteristic of the rhetoric of philosophy, that it does not argue a thesis and is not anything like a treatise, and combine this with the strong antitheory-building tenor and the renunciation of the logoi, the answer seems to be “yes,” given the family resemblance nature of the term “deconstruction.” In fact, given that Wittgenstein’s goal is to remove philosophical problems, it is clear that the antitreatise is a method, like using concepts under erasure, of destroying a theory without replacing it with another. Whereas Derrida in the early works writes treatises asserting the impossibility of treatises, Wittgenstein has found another way.

Wittgenstein’s conservative approach to dichotomies, then, is to accept their usability. The incoherence of a dichotomy is only there in theory. There is nothing wrong with a dichotomy qua dichotomy, as long as the mad rage to theorize does not extend it past the point
where it makes sense, where it has a home in practice. Wittgenstein, then, is the paradigm of the conservative deconstructor.

VI. Is Conservative Deconstruction Conservative?

There are several kinds of objections less conservative deconstructors could pose to the characterization of Wittgenstein as a “conservative deconstructor.” I am convinced that Wittgenstein’s text is completely compatible with some of the positions urged in the objections. I am not so sure what Wittgenstein should reply to others. Wittgenstein’s conservative deconstruction need not be a “quietist” position about change in our forms of life.

The first objection is that the conservative approach to bad dichotomies seems to suppose that the dichotomy can be separated from the history of theory building that surrounds it, at least in our culture. Is the effect of philosophy on terms like “logical” something that we can remove? It would seem not. Once a pair of terms has a literary history from its treatment in philosophical theories, the pair cannot very well have the “philosophical part” excised while the “ordinary language” core remains. Much depends here on just how central philosophy is to our forms of life, how much the tradition from Plato on has transformed things. This may be the central difference in spirit between Wittgenstein and Rorty, on the one hand, and Derrida and Heidegger, on the other. For Rorty, apparently following Wittgenstein, philosophy is quite marginal in its effects, corrupting certain susceptible individuals, but not really corrupting the culture. For Derrida, following Heidegger, philosophical contamination has deeply affected the whole culture, bringing the attitudes implicit in the extended dichotomies into the forms of life of the culture as a whole. Wittgenstein, I think, has mixed opinions on how pervasive philosophy is, for reasons outlined below.

The second objection offers one consideration why the “theorizing impulse” may be more than a marginal philosophical disease: according to a deconstructor of whatever ilk, the values and other “noncognitive” elements “attached” to the sides of the dichotomies are as much a part of their nature as their logical structure. Without the support of the dichotomy of cognitive versus other meaning or logical versus rhetorical connection, there is no such thing as a pure, rhetoric-free, truth-conditional language. Wittgenstein, with his “forms of life” conception of what it is to have a language, would surely agree. But this raises problems for the restraint of dichoto-
mies, for the values attached to the left sides of the dichotomies are precisely valuings of the foundational, decisive, complete, phallic, pure, and direct. Thus the "theoretical impulse" to extend the dichotomies beyond the point where they make sense is no mere accident, but is part of the very structure of those pairs of concepts. That form of life which thinks in terms of these dichotomous concepts is a phallic, linear, theory-mad one. So the disease is not really just that of philosophy, but part of the forms of life in which these concepts are embedded.

Dichotomies can therefore be harmless only if the terms of a dualism can be separated and isolated from the valuings that go with them. But if deconstructions succeed, there is no basis for calling a value attachment or value connection "mere." Then the retention of "the same dichotomy" without the value attachments is impossible. But this conclusion is precisely Wittgenstein's concept of "form of life," and of language as a way of constituting a culture and as something lived. One expects Wittgenstein especially to agree with a conception of language which treats all aspects of words as inseparable parts of one whole social practice. So a "quietist" conservative conclusion from the conservative deconstructive strategy—that deconstructed dualities are still legitimate because ultimate incoherence is not a defect—is inconsistent with Wittgenstein's whole writing.

A dichotomy is a totality of the interrelations of words with each other and with the life of the culture. To suppose that one has the same array of pairs of concepts, even when important parts of their connections with our lives are removed, is to suppose that the deconstructions have failed. As an example of what is really implicit in Wittgenstein's views, one might imagine that sexual figures of speech and metaphors of domination in academic life could be "cleansed," so that, for instance, a seminal paper, a penetrating question, an overpowering point, and a knock-down argument were all understood on a purely intellectual level. But this imagined insulation requires that language work in segregated ways which deconstructive arguments of all sorts have attacked.

Since neither the deconstructor nor the theorist can avoid starting from within some system of presuppositions, the model of how anyone has a change of mind or heart has to be different. The model of change cannot be that change occurs by a powerful analytical argument starting from absolutely firm premises and begging no questions. The quietist conservative would claim that any change of mind is actually due to a change of heart, and illegitimate because not rational. A conceptual revolution cannot be like one of the Vienna Circle's
designs for a perfect representational system constructed from the outside.\textsuperscript{19}

The third objection, then: Conservative deconstruction seems to suppose that it's okay to leave ordinary language alone. Students of Wittgenstein seem to have drawn this conclusion from Wittgenstein's reluctance to theorize and do systematic reform of the "ideal language" sort. However, Wittgenstein need be committed to this quietist conclusion only if all intentional changes in a form of life must be falsifying systematizations. But that model of how one would change one's mind depends on deconstructed dualities. Deconstructive thinkers deny that intentional changes in forms of life must be accompanied by organized, totally visualizable blueprints.

In my view, then, Wittgenstein is committed to no "politically" or conceptually conservative conclusions. Wittgenstein's antitheorism need not be taken to claim that ordinary language is all right, just that it is in order. Its defects are not defects of orderliness.

So conservative deconstruction can suppose that, to a degree, systems of words are malleable and flexible. Wittgenstein can certainly recognize that forms of life have social consequences. Wittgenstein's antitheoretical remarks are compatible with these realizations. His apparent willingness to accept ordinary language practices as they appear in their natural environments could be read as just pointing out that those practices are secure from philosophical attack. Whatever is wrong with them is not failure to conform to conditions for being a proper language.

On this reading of Wittgenstein, what about conservative deconstruction? The fundamental insight, it seems to me, is that the incoherence of a dichotomy, when it is extended too far, shows nothing about that dichotomy's worthiness. Contradictions that arise when one follows out a chain of connection do not show that there is anything wrong with the dichotomy in discourse. To suppose so is to value systematization and totality, rather than particular local working. (Only in mathematics do hidden contradictions mean that everything is a theorem.) Wittgenstein's conception of the workings of language is more or less Maoist, rather than centralized.

The attack on dichotomies, from this point of view, would show that an argument for a dichotomy—namely, that it systematized and made coherent some phenomena—would not work. That does not destroy the dichotomy, it just removes the alleged basis of a kind of privilege. The thought system formed on the basis of that dichotomy does not have the justification of corresponding to the real ways of nature. So the effect of deconstruction is to democratize dichotomous
ideologies. The criticism of a dichotomy must then be on the same basis as the criticism of anything else—that it does harm.

In summary, these reflections on Wittgenstein show that his “conservative” interpretation of deconstruction has a particular kind of negative role: a successful deconstruction does not mean that distinctions have to be abandoned or that there is anything wrong with a particular dichotomy. The role of a deconstruction is to show that a certain kind of privilege is absent from a dichotomy, so that we can abandon and replace that dichotomy if need be.

Thus, the demonstration that a certain phallocentric discourse is ultimately incoherent does not discredit it, except that it allows for the possibility of its removal. Any discrediting is done by showing that it does harm. By the same token, the tu quoque accusation that, say, a deconstructive feminist critique is itself subject to deconstruction and can itself be shown to be ultimately incoherent does not discredit the critique or the position from which it is made. All such questions are decided by the considerations which we have always taken to be relevant—considerations of good and harm.

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NOTES


2 This is not to say that there is no contribution that philosophers can make in the other direction. There is indeed a role in theorizing about literature and language for the kind of thinking analytic philosophy is best at. But analytic philosophy’s interest is primarily in learning from literary theory, not in straightening out the muddled thinking of benighted literary types. That, however, would sometimes be a good thing.

3 This is argued in “The Conclusion of the Theaetetus,” History of Philosophy Quarterly, 1, (1984), 355–67.

4 If the world is a mixture of Form and the formless, and knowledge is total if it is really knowledge, then Forms make real knowledge possible. And if the real is knowable, then the determinacy entailed by knowledge being a relation requires that only what is determinate is real. So awareness is only really awareness if it is a grasping of Form. A knowledge of the forms of things is a systematic and total grasp of reality. Awareness that takes in the particular instances does not achieve anything permanent or constant, but only the evanescent surfaces of things.

5 For discussions of Davidson and Quine as doing essentially the same project of deconstruction as Derrida, see my “Indeterminacy of French Interpretation: Derrida and Davidson,” in Truth and Interpretation, pp. 477–94; and “The Extension of Deconstruction,” pp. 3–21.

6 Forms of discourse which do not assume the dichotomies from the outset are bound to seem and be alien. The effect of a “phase one” deconstructive argument can
then be to get us to see that some absolutely wacko “argument” is actually worth following, when that discussion would have been so beyond the pale of our standards that we could not take it seriously.

7 For instance, Aristotle’s demolition of the theory of Forms showed that the forms that were just $F$ and in no way not $F$ would allow there to be forms only of substances, since these entities had to constitute themselves and so could not be pure cases of accidental features. So the notion of “$F$ itself” was incoherent for accidental features. But Aristotle’s refutation has its own principles and dichotomies, among others the distinction between essence and accident and between substance and other categories of being, without which dichotomies the deconstruction will not work.

8 From the point of view of some of the dichotomies, namely that between logical consequence and rhetorical force, and between reasoning and feeling, this kind of argument is the genetic fallacy, or something else condemned from the Platonic side. Given the expanded notions of coherence and argument if the deconstructions are right, these fallacies are not fallacious.


10 Some followers of Wittgenstein have used this argument strategy as the basis of an “anti-ideal language theory” theory, a rather delicate deformation of Wittgenstein’s strategy. They start with the premise that there are numerous distinctions to be made within the area covered by the dichotomy, so that the dichotomy is a distortion of the phenomena. Hence there is nothing amiss in the language we already use. The language is perfectly suited for the phenomena, if we would only pay attention to it rather than leaping ahead and idealizing. So the theory that a dichotomy would advance is not only not explanatory, it falsifies what is already clear.

This strategy, however, presupposes a theory of language built on a number of interrelated dichotomies. The typical ordinary language argument presupposes a sharp distinction between meaning and information, so that the enterprise of theory building in philosophy can be distinguished from theorizing and systematizing in science. Thus the distinction between the “grammatical” and the scientific is really a distinction between the merely conceptual arrangements and the material that is organized by these systems of concepts. What basically guarantees that “ordinary language is in order” is the conception, perhaps borrowed from Carnap in *The Logical Syntax of Language*, that the choice of conceptual scheme is arbitrary and leaves the facts untouched. Thus this route to attacking dichotomies falls into the same difficulties as the “ideological” and philosophical attacks do.


13 The meaning-bearing rules Wittgenstein denies are rules which apply prior to natural law. These are the rules which apply prior to experience, the a priori which had become, in twentieth-century analytic philosophy, rules of language. This exclusive province of philosophy was supposed to set up conceptual schemes to provide a framework of conventions in terms of which what is the case could be stated.

14 “Theories” and the a priori are two parts of the same complex. Since meaning is supposed to be the basis for the a priori, the theory of meaning must have a deductive, analytic basis. On the other hand, the theorizing impulse sanctions the leap from the facts to a theory of facts, and a leap from the fact that the truth “Snow is white” would
be false if “white” meant purple to a theory that there is a part of the fact that “Snow is white” is true which is isolable as the contribution of meaning.


17 The Wittgensteinian whose work most continues this is O. K. Bouwsma, who is likewise a delight to read.

18 For a deep “metaphorics” of Platonism, see Luce Irigaray’s Speculum of the Other Woman, tr. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), pp. 243–364.

19 Wittgenstein realized the impossibility of starting from a position outside language in the Tractatus, even though he overstated the point as the impossibility of metalanguages. What he should have said, rather than claiming that all metalinguistic remarks are nonsense, is that no metalinguistic remarks can be general.