

Dogmatism, Negotiation, and Wittgensteinian Therapy

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## ABSTRACT

Within public discourse, there is a growing skepticism about the possibility of intersubjective comprehension. In the following, I set out to show why the public discussion regarding the blurriness of semantic boundaries is an important endeavor for building and maintaining epistemic and moral community in which we see ourselves as mutually interdependent co-creators of culture. In chapter one, I aim to validate communal epistemic pursuit whose legitimacy is secured by joint commitments to intersubjective transformative criticism. In chapter two, by citing the public debate during the American Revolution regarding how semantic boundaries in language should be drawn, I aim to show how such a debate ought to be undertaken publicly. Finally, I appeal to conceptions from Wittgenstein's work, namely language-games, family resemblances, and form of life, in order to show how they can help us in the rational pursuit of knowledge and expression.

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## CHAPTER 1: DOGMATISM, INCOMMENSURABILITY, AND EPISTEMIC COMMUNITY

Within public discourse, there is a growing skepticism about the possibility of intersubjective comprehension. Many diagnoses of such incommensurability have been offered.<sup>1</sup> In a recent work on the moral theory of Alasdair MacIntyre, Jason Hannan (2022) claims that there is a “crisis of communication” in which utterances proceed on and on with no terminus due to an inability to secure rational moral agreement in culture. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard (1979/1984) famously proclaimed a crisis of legitimation in modern technological societies stemming from the commodification of knowledge itself, the dissolution of belief in a grand narrative to ground meaningful pursuits, and the vast multiplicity and heterogeneity of means of discourse, expression, and pursuits of knowledge. Other claims of a “post-truth” society, one in which “the epistemological status of statements has little impact in the way they are trafficked,” have become prominent in the wake of the election and presidency of Donald Trump (Wimberly, 2021). At the locus of such diagnoses is a perceived inability to create epistemic community, an inability which hinders our capacity for mutually intelligible expressive possibilities as we move through the fluctuations found in language and culture.

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that there are several species of incommensurability. For example, there is the kind of incommensurability associated with Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend who were concerned that there are significant limits for communication between adherents to competing scientific theories. Incommensurability is here conceived as an inability to maintain mutually intelligible rational expression within a shared form of life.

One symptom of this skepticism concerning the very possibility of mutual comprehension is an increase in dogmatism.<sup>2</sup> A recently released video entitled *What Is a Woman*, a work of bad-faith rhetoric posing as a documentary, features Matt Walsh, a self-described voice for the religious right, asking a variety of people the titular question. Interviewees include Dr. Patrick Grzanka, a professor of the interdisciplinary Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Tennessee, and Dr. Marci Bowers, a surgeon specializing in sex reassignment. Walsh casts himself as someone pursuing the truth, as trying to “[get] to the bottom of things” (Folk, 2022). His actual goal, however, is to cast the interviewees as being unable to answer what he deems a “simple question” in an attempt to disclaim so-called “gender ideology.” Particularly abhorrent is the insidious editing of Dr. Grzanka’s interview. By implementing a fast-forward edit that skips the majority of Dr. Grzanka’s considered answer, the interviewee, who in a good faith attempt would be respected as a fellow inquirer, is effectively silenced. That this is Walsh’s goal becomes ever more apparent as Walsh interviews those who subscribe to his dogmatic worldview, such as another fellow high-profile internet charlatan, Jordan Peterson. Their conversation is presented relatively unedited.

What Walsh and his fellow dogmatists want to enforce is their preferred essentialist answer to the question, a point Dr. Grzanka makes before their interview is

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<sup>2</sup> By dogmatism I mean a worldview which asserts that certain principles are inconvertibly true regardless of counterevidence or intersubjective criticism. In particular, the dogmatism of which I am concerned is one that, in asserting its worldview, seizes culture and restricts what can be expressed. As Wittgenstein (1977/1980, 28e) writes, “I am not thinking of these dogmas as determining men’s opinions but rather as completely controlling the *expression* of all opinions. People will live under an absolute, palpable tyranny, though without being able to say they are not free. For dogma is expressed in the form of an assertion, and is unshakable... It is not a *wall* setting limits to what can be believed, but more like a *brake* which, however, practically serves the same purpose; it’s almost as though someone were to attach a weight to your foot to restrict your freedom of movement. This is how dogma becomes irrefutable and beyond the reach of attack.” This can be contrasted with the Wittgensteinian conception of a shared form of life, in which we see ourselves as mutually interdependent co-creators of culture.



terminated. The piece culminates in Walsh's wife supposedly giving the final verdict by answering "an adult human female," the answer that Walsh and his ilk presuppose. They do so to enforce an identity on an entire population of embodied individuals in conformity with dogmatism and patriarchal values, a worldview that assumes that the development of personality, behavior, and cognitive capacity are biologically determined, and that this determination prescribes distinct gender roles in accord with Western stereotypes. This presupposition, which Helen Longino (1990) analyzes as "the assumption of a thoroughgoing [gender] dimorphism or sexual essentialism" (129), assumes that masculinity and femininity are "real elements of a dichotomy emerging from the observation of human experience rather than as cultural constraints imposed on that experience" (170). As long as dogmatic assumptions like this underpin discourse, conceptual criticism from differing viewpoints, a necessary element of genuine epistemic pursuit, is impossible.

It is fairly obvious to see that such a dogmatic work is a mockery of genuine epistemic pursuits,<sup>3</sup> a polemical parade posing as a desire for truth. While it may seem we ought not take the bait and engage with such a bad-faith argument,<sup>4</sup> the film has encouraged dangerous public action. For example, during the September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022 broadcast of his nightly Fox News program, Tucker Carlson accused hospitals that provide gender affirmation healthcare of "mutilating children" (Carlson, 2022). During the broadcast, which also featured Matt Walsh as guest commentator, Carlson aired the

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<sup>3</sup> In contrast, a disingenuous epistemic pursuit is one that refuses to acknowledge or respond to transformative criticism.

<sup>4</sup> This author was likewise hesitant. But I highlight this example because this type of dogma is on such blatant display.

names and photographs of surgeons and the board of directors of Vanderbilt University Medical Center. Amidst threats of violence, Vanderbilt paused certain gender affirmation surgeries (Wegner & Brown, 2022). In a letter to the National Governors Association, the American Medical Association (2021) asserted that the clinical guidelines for gender affirmation surgeries are established by empirical evidence that “has demonstrated that trans and non-binary gender identities are normal variations of human identity and expression.” The letter lists gender affirmation surgery, along with mental health counseling, non-medical social transition, and gender-affirming hormone therapy, as “medically necessary services” approved to treat gender dysphoria, the forgoing of which can have tragic consequences, such as increased suicide rates amongst transgender youth. Additionally, the AMA’s letter expresses concern for government overreach that would inhibit medical practice:

Decisions about medical care belong within the sanctity of the patient-physician relationship. As with all medical interventions, physicians are guided by their ethical duty to act in the best interest of their patients and must tailor recommendations about specific interventions and the timing of those interventions to each patient’s unique circumstances. Such decisions must be sensitive to the child’s clinical situation, nurture the child’s short and long-term development, and balance the need to preserve the child’s opportunity to make important life choices autonomously in the future. We believe it is inappropriate and harmful for any state to legislatively dictate that certain transition-related services are never appropriate and limit the range of options physicians and families may consider when making decisions for pediatric patients. (AMA, 2021)

Legislative prohibitions at the behest of such dogmatists are a dangerous intrusion into the practice of medicine, a practice that includes both the implementation of treatment and communal epistemic pursuit. Future violence, hinderance of needed health care, and the inhibition of medical practice can be expected.

This kind of dogmatism has not only affected our local community, but has also been expressed in national judicial processes and policy making. As the first day of proceedings for the nomination of Supreme Court Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson was coming to a close, Senator Marsha Blackburn asked the judicial nominee the same disingenuous question: “Can you provide a definition for the word ‘woman’?” (Weisman, 2022). Judge Jackson rightfully chose not to engage, pragmatically declaring the question as irrelevant to the proceedings. After pushing the question further, Senator Blackburn declared that “the fact that you can’t give me a straight answer about something as fundamental as what a woman is underscores the dangers of the kind of progressive education that we are hearing about.” Along with being a clear parroting of right-wing rhetoric meant to rile up reactionary constituents and retain political power and relevancy, Senator Blackburn’s quip was also an assault on higher educational institutions, perhaps the last bastion of the communal project of epistemic pursuits.<sup>5</sup>

The labeling of such institutions or communities in which epistemic projects are pursued as “dangerous” works to serve dogmatism by casting skepticism upon any attempt at criticism or rational expression. I argue that a conviction in ineluctable

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<sup>5</sup> In a recent issue of *Dissent*, Aziz Rana (2022) notes that universities are some of the least segregated institutions in the United States. Because epistemic community requires the dialogue of a multiplicity of voices, universities are, though still with much to improve, fertile ground for such pursuits. An increased rhetoric about privatizing education abounds in right-wing circles. Senator Blackburn’s quip should be seen in this light.

incommensurability makes room for dogmatism. Whether this be dogmatism in the form of religious fundamentalism, right-wing politics, corporate hegemony, cultural segregationism, or misogyny that works to police and enforce the patriarchal status quo, as dogmatism becomes expressed in public discourse, an insistence on a reductive understanding of our lives and language prevails. Because our lives and pursuits are woven in language, the dogmatic insistence on reductive essentialist definitions of social kinds serves not only to commandeer meaning, but also to do violence to expressive, embodied existence.

Surrender to, and acceptance of, diagnoses of incommensurability cannot be the only conclusion. How, then, do we avoid the trap of continuously posing one set of dogmas over against another set, which in turn generates incommensurability and skepticism toward intersubjective epistemic pursuit? For, in the eyes of the right-wing as represented by Matt Walsh, those from the left or center are also offering their own dogmas. I argue that therapeutic tools found in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, tools that demonstrate that the semantic boundary around a term is both blurry and constituted by use, rather than a list of necessary and sufficient conditions, can help us begin to negotiate meaning.

As Richard Eldridge (1997) describes *Philosophical Investigations*:

[It] presents a protagonist seeking to articulate the terms for full human self-command and self-expression... The governing problem that is played out... is how to avoid all at once dogmatism, nihilist skepticism, and simple indifferentism... [The moral] is that a certain continuousness of aspiration and

self-revision in culture, against the commands of dogma, must be accepted, even embraced. (7)

With forays into metaphysics, psychology of perception, and the philosophy of mind and language, *Philosophical Investigations* undertakes these pursuits within in a dramatic inquiry whose tension of conjecture and rebuke “aims at making it impossible for us to forget the entanglement of conceptual consciousness with memory, desire, social relations, and aspirations to expressive freedom” (Eldridge, 1997, p. 8).

Much of the focus of *Philosophical Investigations* resides in considerations of how ordinary language is used as we move through life and culture, and a resistance “against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (Wittgenstein, 1958/1953, §109).<sup>6</sup> As Wittgenstein claims early in the work “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (§19). Within this form of life, we find ourselves intertwined in a multiplicity of language-games, modes of expression informed by dynamic rules of meaning and intelligibility. The recognition of this common form of life, conceived as consisting of conceptual consciousness and self-consciousness, glued together by both a shared desire for rational expression and the shared necessities of our embodied mindedness, helps us to see ourselves as mutually interdependent co-creators of culture.

In contrast, when dogmatism seizes a prominent position in public discourse and policy, it enforces its assumptions by casting skepticism toward communal epistemic pursuits and inhibiting expressive possibilities. A conviction in ineluctable incommensurability contributes to skepticism toward communal epistemic pursuits by

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<sup>6</sup> All subsequent references to *Philosophical Investigations* will likewise be cited by section number, not page number, as is the norm for this work.

denying any rational means of articulation between differing beliefs or theoretical frameworks. If we are to avoid a conviction in ineluctable incommensurability, we must set forth criteria that establish the possibility and legitimation of communal epistemic pursuits. To establish what some of these criteria are, I appeal to the work of Hanna Kiri Gunn and Helen Longino.

In “How Should We Build Epistemic Community?,” Hanna Kiri Gunn (2020) defines an epistemic community as constituted by networks of dependence between individuals in their shared pursuit of knowledge. Each of us is embedded in many such networks, each with its own degree of significance for our lives. She argues that a healthy epistemic community, one in which moral and epistemic duties are a social effort, can be contrasted with one conceived as a mere collection of atomistic individual agents, each striving only for the regulation of their own beliefs. A community of individuals with a joint commitment to maintain standards of rational justification and belief regulation, as well as standards of epistemic trust and responsibility results in the process of developing, amending, maintaining, and abandoning beliefs collectively. In other words, the goal is not merely to see the pursuit of knowledge and rational belief as a personal privilege, but to see belief regulation and the relation of knowledge as both a moral and epistemic obligation to a community.

While Gunn is unclear on what exactly these joint commitments should be, her general thesis shares affinities with Helen Longino (1990), whose *Science as Social Knowledge* easily fills in the gaps. Longino lists four criteria, or joint commitments, that ensure objectivity<sup>7</sup> in epistemic pursuits:

- (1.) There must be recognized avenues for the criticism of evidence, of methods, and of assumptions and reasoning;
- (2.) There must exist shared standards that critics can invoke;
- (3.) The community as a whole must be responsive to such criticism; and
- (4.) Intellectual authority must be shared equally among qualified practitioners.

(76)

Longino supplements the second criteria with a non-exhaustive list of such standards, which include empirical adequacy, truth, comprehensiveness, and the satisfaction of and relevance to social needs. For Longino, objectivity in epistemic pursuits is an achievement of an intersubjective community that is capable of generating transformative criticism. Transformative criticism is possible as a consequence of two factors. First is that we share a common language we use to describe experience and within which we reason. Second is the presupposition that the objects of experience exist independently of our perception of them,<sup>8</sup> a factor that imposes constraints on what can rationally be believed or meaningfully articulated. Because of these factors, background assumptions

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<sup>7</sup> The limits of this paper do not provide room for a full overview of how objectivity is conceived in various debates in philosophy. What is meant here is ensuring that scientific or epistemic pursuits are not influenced by personal, idiosyncratic biases.

<sup>8</sup> A question can be raised here whether this applies to the concepts of mathematics. I acknowledge that this may be problematic to Longino's argument, but it is a debate I must bracket due to the limited scope of this paper.

that affect evidential reasoning, that is, how data is interpreted as evidence for hypotheses or theoretical assertions that describe processes or states of affairs, are both articulatable and publicly comprehensible. An epistemic community's claim to provide objective knowledge is thus justified by its responsiveness to transformative, intersubjective criticism. Conceived as such, genuine epistemic pursuits are a dynamic practice that occurs in a network of mutually dependent individuals with shared values and goals, a capacity for rational expression, and a responsiveness to transformative criticism.

In their accounts, Gunn and Longino shift the focus away from the personal beliefs and epistemic commitments of the atomized individual and toward those of community. When we consider the acquisition and justification of knowledge within this context of codependence, we are able to understand our epistemic agency as rationally dependent on others. However, by stating that "the proposal here... is not meant to be descriptive even if it may overlap in some sense with preexisting norms of truth-seeking," Gunn notes that hers is a prescriptive conception of epistemic community. In this prescriptive account, a healthy epistemic community is seen as one "[consisting] of members who recognize that their commitment to one another gives them a reason to follow-through on the substance of these commitments" and that joint commitments to epistemic community are "intentional acts of the will" (Gunn 573).

The problem is that, in the realm of public discourse, we are often left with little means of verifying who endorses the joint commitments of epistemic community. It is one thing to be a participant in an epistemic community of, say, professional philosophers, where the terms of membership and dissemination of knowledge are highly standardized, distinctly normative, and vetted. It is another thing entirely to be a member



of a public or political community where there is, barring censorship or public shunning, little clarity in deciphering who is assenting to the joint commitments of membership. This should not suggest that we revert to the individualistic model of epistemic community where one is only accountable to oneself, or that anything goes. We should also not accept inescapable incommensurability or dogmatism. Nonetheless, we do require some way to discern who is a member of an epistemic community, with its required joint commitments, and who is acting in accord to the demands and constraints of dogmatism. Hence, my appeal to a Wittgensteinian account of our lives and ordinary language.

Before doing so, however, I must address the following objection. One may believe, rather than looking at language, we ought to decipher the personal intentions, beliefs, or commitments, such as allegiance to a political party or identification with a particular culture, an individual maintains as they enter into public discourse. One's personal intentions, beliefs, and commitments surely are factors in the manner by which one engages in a community, what kinds of information one accepts, what outlets are deemed acceptable to convey knowledge, and how one regulates belief. However, in appealing to one's personal intentions, beliefs, and commitments in an attempt to discredit or disengage an argument, we risk appealing to fallacious ad hominem attacks. Additionally, when knowledge is disseminated, whether through the most flippant meme or the most rigorously peer-reviewed journal, these personal intentions, beliefs, and commitments from the agent of which the knowledge stems are opaque, if not lost completely to or hidden from, the recipient.

As noted above, when efforts are made to control public discourse in the attempt to seize meaning and culture, dogmatism, with its insistence on a reductive understanding of our lives and language, is enforced. Because the dissemination of such views through algorithmically determined outlets, such as YouTube, is so rapid, ubiquitous, and abundant, the task of personally uncovering an individual's dogmatism by researching what organizations or political parties of which an individual holds affiliation, or how one might describe themselves in the annals of their homepages, twitter feeds, and blogs, is insurmountable. Furthermore, if we assume the responsibility of rebutting such discourse, we risk both engaging with, and thus legitimating, bad-faith inquiry and wasting intellectual and political resources. In the case of Matt Walsh, whose pieces are primarily disseminated through such algorithmically determined outlets, by paying attention to his use and insistence on reductive essentialist definitions of social kinds that conform to Western patriarchal stereotypes, we can comprehend the dogmatic background assumptions, an ideology that allows no credence to transformative criticism, without having to fully engage with him as a fellow inquirer.

Additionally, because the pursuit of epistemic ends is communal in nature, Gunn notes that "our communicative practices are deeply connected to many of our epistemic practices" (Gunn 567). Communicative practices "enable us to engage in special kinds of collaborative epistemic activity including testimony, deliberation, dialogue more generally, and giving reasons and asking for reasons." For any community, language serves as a central facet of communicative practice. But language does not merely serve as a vessel to disseminate and deliberate knowledge, it is an interface in which knowledge is both generated and instantiated. As Ian Hacking claims in *Why Does*

*Language Matter to Philosophy?*, language has remained a focus of inquiry for philosophers throughout the centuries because of its deep connection with epistemological concerns. Hacking's survey sketches the tendency of 17<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers to view language as merely a means to instantiate ideas that are developed through the interaction of the experience and mental discourse of an individual inquirer, to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century view of language's role in the generation of public knowledge and meaning. Throughout this historical sketch, language "[has served] as the interface between the knowing subject and what is known" (Hacking 187). In other words, language is the means through which knowledge becomes communal. By doing so we can further inquire into language as "no longer merely a tool by which experiences are shared, no longer even the interface between the knower and the known, but as that which constitutes human knowledge" (Hacking 187). As such, some descriptive tool to discern how language works in public discourse is needed to clear away the opaqueness of intention.

Yet, before a descriptive tool can be of any use, we must resist the temptation to, as put by Wittgenstein, "sublime the logic of our language" (§37). That is, if language is of such import to both communal epistemic pursuits and rational expression in public discourse, there must be open dialogue regarding the semantic boundaries of our shared language. As Wittgenstein writes further:

We feel as if we had to *penetrate* phenomenon: our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the '*possibilities*' of phenomena. We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the *kind of statement* that we make about phenomena...[.] Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one.

Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language. (§90)

In the next chapter, I cite debates that took place during the revolutionary era of the United States to show how an open discourse regarding how semantic boundaries are drawn in a common language plays an instrumental role as we act as mutually interdependent co-creators of culture.

## CHAPTER II: LANGUAGE AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

The realm of public discourse is constituted by a multiplicity of means of communication. Town halls, newspapers, television, blogs, social media outlets, podcasts—the list is long and sure to grow. Through these myriad outlets, policy is discussed, values are weighed, events are interpreted, emotions are appealed to, and culture is created. What they all have in common is the proliferation of language. As we debate what actions we ought to perform, which viewpoints we ought to hold, or how we ought to view ourselves, we must consider language, the very means by which we bring these issues to communal light. Indeed, language is itself an entity whose nature must be publicly debated.

As John Howe (2004) argues in *Language and Political Meaning in Revolutionary America*, discussions regarding language were of central importance in public discourse and the political discussions during the founding of the United States. As Howe notes, the United States of the late 1700s also faced an increased proliferation of language. With the expansion of printed discourse, “sermons and essays, laws and constitutions, resolutions and proclamations, speeches and debates poured from American presses in unprecedented quantity” (2). This increased proliferation encouraged political writers to undertake a public debate about the rigidity of semantic boundaries. On the one hand, certain political writers argued that language provided an unvarying medium of expression. That is, once prescriptive rules were established, language provided fixed denotation.<sup>9</sup> Howe traces this view as stemming from arguments

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<sup>9</sup> This is akin to what Wittgenstein describes in §§91-92: “But now it may come to look as if there were something like a final analysis of our forms of language, and so a *single* completely resolved form of every

articulated by the grammarians and linguists of 18<sup>th</sup>-century England, in which a concerted effort was undertaken to fix the syntax and vocabulary of English so as to preserve meaning and allow for the unambiguous expression of shared meaning and universal truth. This view of “fixing” language resonated with figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Noah Webster, who both actively campaigned for language reform in 18<sup>th</sup> century America. In their view, securing a distinctly American language would serve “as a band of national union” (35). Once rigidly standardized, could withstand future distortions as history unfolded. Language could then be deployed for constitutional purposes that ensured a stable, unwavering anchor for public discourse. As Howe quotes Thomas Paine, “the American constitutions are to liberty, what a grammar is to language: they define its parts of speech, and practically construct them into syntax” (56). Paine was surely mistaken here. The rules of grammar do not necessarily set either the intension or extensions of a term. However, his statement shows the import such figures placed on language’s role in prescribing shared and stable meaning.

For those subscribing to fixed signification, language was understood as autonomous from its historical context, and could be used to both prescribe and constrain human behavior and preserve conservative values. By contrast, other political writers understood language as having an evolving and adaptive nature in accord with the flux of

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expression. That is, as if our usual forms of expression were, essentially, unanalysed; as if there were something hidden in them that had to be brought to light. When this is done the expression is completely clarified and our problem solved. It can also be put like this: we eliminate misunderstandings by making our expressions more exact; but now it may look as if we were moving towards a particular state, a state of complete exactness; and as if this were the real goal of our investigation...[.] This finds expression in questions as to the *essence* of language, of propositions, of thought...[.] For they see in the essence, not something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement, but something that lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we see when we look *into* the thing, and which an analysis digs out...[.] We ask: “*What is language?*”...[.] And the answer to [this question] is to be given once for all; and independently of any future experience.”

history and human experience. For those subscribing to the adaptive view, language was better suited to be an instrument of political creativity needed for an evolving political future. As Howe notes, this view conceived language as “fluid rather than stable in its structure and meaning, language mirrored nature imperfectly and thus served a medium through which nature’s truths, in politics as elsewhere, were continuously contested” (4). As English officials and colonial Whigs argued against each other using the same terminology, and as rapidly changing political circumstances eroded confidence in the fixed view of language, this adaptive view came into prominence and was promoted by such figures as Thomas Jefferson, who was amongst its most ardent defenders. In letters with John Adams, Jefferson expressed the value of “neology,” that is, the introduction of new words or expressions into a language or the use of an established word in a novel sense. Howe notes that Jefferson maintained that “society is the workshop in which new words are elaborated,” and that, faced with new political and cultural possibilities, and the new terrain of the American natural landscape, the world of revolutionary America was “filled with ideas for which they had no words, and thus which they had no power to express” (80). Additionally, concerted efforts were undertaken to purge monarchical principles from political language and replace them with republican ideals. References to crown and parliament were scrubbed from official documents. Political titles were recast to fit republican values.<sup>10</sup> This editing of documents, and other similar practices, were not arbitrary actions. “As the language of monarchy was replaced by a new republican discourse,” Howe writes,

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Howe notes how in 1789 “the national Congress spent several weeks in heated debate on the question of whether the new chief executive should be titled “His Elective Highness” or addressed more simply as “Mr. President” (79).

as the task of revolution-making set social and economic interests against one another, and as the universe of political writers expanded and conflicts over the control of political discourse increased, language became the object as well as the instrument of political struggle. (63)

Conceived as such, language was to serve both instrumental and descriptive functions as uncertain and tumultuous political and cultural events unfolded.

While the unstable dynamics of republican politics contributed to the contested debates on the nature of semantic boundaries and language's role in political pursuits, the practice of concealing the authorial origins of certain texts behind curtains of pseudonymity and anonymity also raised troubling questions. Anonymous and pseudonymous authorship complicated both the processes of public discourse and readers' attempts to interpret textual meaning by diminishing authorial accountability, separating texts from their specific circumstances, and allowing writers to assume characters with unreliable narrative voices. These factors opened public discourse to the sways of rumor and misinformation. In obfuscating both writers' personal affiliations and pursuits and the specific circumstances of a particular text, the attention of readers become focused on the literal language contained in political texts, not their instrumental function. As Howe notes, the practice of anonymous and pseudonymous public writing declined considerably by the 1790s, when "knowledge of [authorial origin] came increasingly to be regarded as essential to the discovery of a texts implicit as well as explicit meaning" (11).

This opaqueness of intention and circumstances in which public discourse proliferated is not unlike our own. With the increased anonymity and pseudonymity of



online public discourse, we face a similar problem in which the context of how language is used and the intentions and affiliations of the author are obscured. This is a considerable problem, given that pseudo-inquirers like Matt Walsh are allowed to propagate their views in an obfuscating manner through algorithmically determined social media outlets. It is only once they are famous that we are able to decipher their authorial origin. By the time that accrues, considerable damage to epistemic community has already been done.

The two competing conceptions of semantic boundaries as either “fixed” or “adaptive” played out most dramatically in the debate between Federalists and Antifederalists in the 1780s. Antifederalists argued that a fixed and literal political language was best suited to preserve republican virtues. By contrast, Federalists, insisting that novel historical circumstances warranted adaptive instruments of public discourse, argued that language could not exist autonomously, that is, apart from dynamic pursuits of everyday politics, as an expression of universal, unwavering truth. Seen as entrenched within the changing circumstances of history and culture, language was to be continuously debated to suit the needs of expanding pursuits.

Howe argues, that with the triumph of the Federalists in constitutional pursuits in 1788-1789, “the language of American politics was decisively transformed” (224). He writes:

The transformation of linguistic culture and practice...was also fundamental in the emergence of a democratic (albeit white male) politics...Only when language came to be employed in the continuing exploration of political truth, only when it provided a linguistic practice suited to the ongoing task of political

experimentation and popular contention, could the construction of a democratic dialogue proceed. (6-7)

It is surely contested that the founding of the United States was and resulted in ideal democratic processes. However, this historical exegesis suggests that, in the midst of a tumultuous political climate, debates on the rigidity of semantic boundaries are central to securing a communal framework of meaning and pursuit. Faced with the opposing dogmatism of monarchical and imperialist England, and the threat of incommensurability stemming from changing historical circumstance, the increased proliferation of public discourse, and the advent of a novel culture, the role of language as an instrumental means to generate and instantiate epistemic projects and expression was of central concern.

Because of language's central instrumental function in generating knowledge, its import for maintaining and legitimating epistemic community and transformative criticism, its potential to conceal background assumptions such as Matt Walsh's reductive essentialist conceptions of social kinds, all of which affect our capacity for rational expression and the creation of culture, this debate ought to be revisited publicly.<sup>11</sup> Though the increased proliferation of public discourse, as I have noted, has contributed both to the rising prominence of culture-seizing dogmatism and incommensurability, it has also nonetheless offered outlet to a multiplicity of voices and vernaculars, allowing for perspectives different from the wealthy and educated bastion of white capital owning males to be propagated. By bringing to light diachronic meaning shifts and shifting

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, this debate has been one of the main concerns for philosophers for centuries. What I mean here is to undertake the debate through the same outlets and with the same degree of visibility as other public debates that take place outside of the confines of peer-reviewed journals.

historical and cultural contexts, these voices in tandem with discussions regarding the nature of our shared language are crucial to opposing both dogmatism and incommensurability.

Howe notes that, in the Federalists' view "while [language is] fully capable of exploring "first principles," [it] could never fully encompass them because human experience was too limited, human reason too frail, and the categories of thought that language served too imperfect" (224). When faced with discourse that questions what we ought to do, what we ought to value, how we ought to judge, we must include the question "*how* is this conveyed?" and thus resist the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. "Sometimes," wrote Wittgenstein, "an expression has to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning, - then it can be put back into circulation" (1977/1980, 39e).

If we are to productively revisit this debate, we cannot merely rely on the recycling of old forms and their assumptions. We must recognize that the semantic boundary around a term is both blurry and constituted by use, rather than a list of necessary and sufficient conditions, a recognition that can help us begin to negotiate meaning across cultures and within a community. In the following chapter, I appeal to conceptions from Wittgenstein's work, namely language-games, family resemblances, and form of life, that allow us to see how semantic boundaries are blurry, and thus negotiable, in order to show how they help us in the rational pursuit of knowledge and expression through which we see ourselves as mutually interdependent co-creators of culture. I conclude with an appeal to the work of Cressida Heyes, who argues for a Wittgensteinian approach to feminist theory and political action.

### CHAPTER III: WITTGENSTEINIAN THERAPY

Language plays an instrumental role in sustaining epistemic pursuits, and, more generally, the creation of culture. As skepticism about the possibility of shared comprehension grows, we see the threat of both ineluctable incommensurability and dogmatism. As this skepticism grows, there is a perceived inability to create epistemic community, an inability that hinders our capacity for authentic expressiveness as we move through the fluctuations found in language and culture. Another symptom of this skepticism is the rising visibility of those who wish to control public discourse by enforcing a culture-seizing dogmatic world view. Hallmarks of this dogmatism include the prominence of pseudo-inquirers, such as Matt Walsh, who, by championing reductive definitions of social kinds, attempt to limit expression and thus encourage further skepticism toward intersubjective communal epistemic pursuits.

In such a tumultuous political climate, investigating the workings of language is central to securing a communal framework of meaning. With the advent of algorithmically determined discourse, descriptive tools are needed to discover how language is being used in order to uncover its proponents' background assumptions. As noted in chapter one, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* provides such therapeutic tools. These include the concepts of language-games, family resemblances, and form of life. As Wittgenstein wrote "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (§19). By doing so, we can position ourselves within this shared form of life, where we find ourselves intertwined in a multiplicity of language-games, or modes of expression informed by dynamic rules of meaning and intelligibility.

Remarking on form of life, Wittgenstein writes, “‘So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?’—It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinion but in form of life.” (§241) That is, this “agreement” is not of content, but of a shared grammar consisting of human behaviors, rational powers, expressive techniques, and a repertoire of ordinary practice by which these performances can be measured. As Richard Eldridge puts it in *Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism* (1997):

Human beings are the kinds of beings who are capable of articulate conceptualization within that interfusion wherein natural power and public practice are brought into engagement with one another...[.] My conceptual performances take up and are responsive to already existent patters of usage that I am able to cite in order to make clear what I do. But these patterns of usage are not absolute samples, but instead open-minded patterns that it is up to me to continue, against the background of their nonabsolute guidance...[.] Agreement in form of life...is not anything absolute. Logical necessities (“nothing is red and green all over”) are created within frameworks we must share in order to think at all. But departures from them in life are possible. And these frameworks do not legislate all cases that may arise. Our thinking and understanding, our speaking and our conceptual performances, are *partly determined* by a background of ordinary practice. (287, 238, 41)

By contrast, Wittgenstein claims that “if a lion could talk, we could not understand him... only of a human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one

say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious.” (223e, §281). Even if a lion could, indeed, speak English, their expressions, desires, and intentions could not be communicated to us. Lions do not form governments, tell jokes, dance ballet, perform surgeries, go on dates, or despair over their thesis. Because the meaning of our words is constituted by the manner and context in which they are used within our lived experience, that is, the language-game in which they are woven, the form of life of a lion is incommensurable with our own.

The recognition of our common form of life, conceived as consisting of conceptual consciousness and self-consciousness, glued together by both a shared desire for rational expression and the necessities of our embodied mindedness, helps us to see ourselves as mutually interdependent co-creators of culture. In the following, I aim to explicate facets of Wittgenstein’s work. I then conclude by appealing to the work of Cressida Heyes, who provides an example of a Wittgensteinian approach to feminist theory and political action.

As described by Eldridge, the method of *Philosophical Investigations* is not to announce a discovery or propose a single theory. Rather, this method is an internal dialogue of proposal and rebuke in which epistemological and linguistic problems persist but are not altogether resolved.<sup>12</sup> Eldridge argues that *Philosophical Investigations* contains a dramatic structure. Theses regarding the nature of conceptual consciousness are given, considered, but ultimately deemed philosophically inconclusive. These series of proposal and rebuke “[act] out the tension between essentialism and conventionalism

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<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein’s preface corroborates such a view. He described the work as a series of philosophical remarks, “a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings” (Wittgenstein, 1953/1958, v).

in ways that display to us who we are” (2). These tensions are not just of concern for philosophers, but inextricably woven in human life. Faced with shifts in meaning and the antagonisms of culture, such as the debate over the meaning of the word ‘woman,’ we constantly question our capacity for conceptual consciousness and rational expression.

“Above all,” Eldridge writes:

There is the brute wonder: How do I have a world of objects that are there for me as a judging consciousness, and how and to what extent do others also have such a world? How might I best develop a character and display it in practice? How am I to lead my life? (4)

We are able to form concepts about the world in which we live. We are self-conscious of this ability. We want to be able to convey these concepts through linguistic and cultural practice as we move through life. Do I use these capacities like others do? How are we to anchor meaning through these practices? This desire for a conclusive anchor for our conceptual, linguistic, and cultural practices is the drama that unfolds as Wittgenstein presents fragments and “overlapping readings of finite performances.” (7)

While we may never discover incontrovertible conditions for perfect self-command, the desire to do so remains. Eldridge writes:

The moral...is that a certain continuousness of aspiration and self-revision in culture, against the commands of dogma, must be accepted, even embraced...[.] Leading a life will be always something like trying to write a poem or a novel or a sonata or a liturgy. Only through such embrace will it be possible to avoid the reductions of philosophical thinking to either complacent dogmatism or empty, self-congratulatory nihilism. (7)

In acknowledging this desire via fragmentary remarks, Wittgenstein's methodology resists both dogmatism and incommensurability. Instead, it exemplifies how we move through the antagonisms of culture and the fluctuations of history and language as an act of *poeisis*. That is, as human beings who are bearers of rational power and who desire its perfect expression, a continuous effort must be made to bring our conceptual practices to mutually co-create the cultural and linguistic context in which such conceptual practices may be utilized. Such practices can never be deemed merely conventional or solidly grounded by metaphysical reductionism, they must always be reconsidered, reappraised, and renewed. Noting the perpetually incomplete nature of these practices, Wittgenstein offers a metaphor that likens language to a city:

Ask yourself whether our language is complete;— whether it was so before the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus were incorporated in it; for these are, so to speak, suburbs of our language. (And how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?) Our language can be seen as an ancient city; a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses. (§18)

Language is a city where we must find our way about. Or, as Eldridge puts it “different regions of language are different regions of life and human activity” (144). Though we are born into a series of already established practices and learn a language whose semantics are embedded with a history of interests, our modalities of expression are



constantly being amended. We are at once inheritors of modes of expression, and co-creators of them.

*Philosophical Investigations*, among many other concerns, is also a work in the philosophy of mind. It asks, how are people able to recognize objects under concepts? What is the nature of this ability? What makes us have this ability, and not just sensory awareness? Inextricably linked with these questions are questions of linguistic practice. For this reason, Wittgenstein begins *Philosophical Investigations* by gesturing toward a theory of language assumed in St. Augustine's *Confessions*. St. Augustine, when recollecting how he learned language, viewed language strictly as a means of signifying objects. Yet, Eldridge argues that the beginning of *Philosophical Investigations* sets out to demonstrate that "it is a mistake to think that there are words on the one side, the world on the other. Instead, we should remember that we do things in the world with words" (143).

The Augustinian reduction of language to a means of mere representation cannot account for the whole of human language. Rather, as Wittgenstein continuously demonstrates throughout his later work, meaning is constituted by use:

For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (§43).

But if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use*. (Wittgenstein, 1958/1960, p. 4)

Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails, and screws.—The functions of words are as diverse as

the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.) Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script or print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. (§11)<sup>13</sup>

To illustrate this, Wittgenstein continuously invokes the concept of language-games. Because this concept is metaphorically employed to illustrate a dynamic and activity-oriented perspective on language, it can be quite difficult to define. However, its core illustration is that linguistic meaning is constituted by and through context, established practice, and intended use. Thus, saying something is akin to making a move in a game. Consider, for example, the meaning of the word ‘game’. We know it applies to various activities: chess, Battleship, football, a child playing alone with a rock. But we are at a loss to identify what all of these activities have in common. The trick to verifying meaning is to discern the specific use of a statement and judge it accordingly. Wittgenstein uses the example of the phrase “five slabs.” Depending on the context, it can be used to answer a question regarding, say, what has been left on a construction site. It can be used as an order from someone who wants to be brought five slabs; it can be used as a password to a nightclub, an inside joke, or the name of a band.

Whatever the case, when questioning the meaning of a word or sentence, *don’t look for the essence, look at the use*. The ways in which we use language in the world are fluctuating and dynamic. As Wittgenstein writes:

There are *countless* kinds [of sentences]...[.] And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once and for all; but new types of language, new

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<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein ends this remark with the following quip: “Especially when we are doing philosophy!”

language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and forgotten...[.] Here the term “language-*game*” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. (§23)

As Eldridge elaborates, “the determinacy of sense is reconstrued as something that is established *within* language-games and nowhere outside of them” (175). The attention to language-games is designed to show us that we must describe the varieties of meaningful utterances that are available to use within such language-games: “we must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place” (§109). Additionally, it is designed to show us that, because our uses of language are seldom controlled by anything fixed, we have a certain freedom to do a variety of things with language. That is, there may be possibility of multiple uses for a term. “Language here is both the cause of our bewilderment and the instrument of resistance to it” (190).

Though such notions resist reductive conceptions, Wittgenstein does acknowledge a wish for our expressive practices to be incontrovertibly anchored by asserting that our words signify metaphysically simple objects. This wish that words unproblematically link up to the world is sought with the hope that, “the very stuff of the world [might] guarantee the sense, and hence reception of our words” (157). This discussion takes place in §§39-46, as Wittgenstein remarks on both the work of Bertrand Russell and the act of naming. He considers the sense of the name ‘Excalibur,’ an object that is either destroyed or had never existed. Again, the sense of the term is shown to be constituted by its use:

But what are the simple constituent parts of which reality is composed?—What are the simple constituent parts of a chair?—The bits of wood of which it is

made? Or the molecules, or the atoms?—"Simple" means: not composite. And here the point is: in what sense 'composite'? It makes no sense at all to speak absolutely of the simple parts of a chair...[.] We use the word "composite" (and therefore the word "simple") in an enormous number of different and differently related ways...[.] To the *philosophical* question: "Is the visual image of this tree composite, and what are its component parts?" the correct is: "That depends on what you understand by 'composite'." (And that is of course not an answer but a rejection of the question.) (§47)

Yet, even if meaning is constituted by and through use, we still want some justification, some way to ensure meaning. Wittgenstein answers this wish with his notion of family resemblance:

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways... and the result of this examination [of games] is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail...[.] And we extend [our concepts] as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres. §§65-67

Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance argues against the view that concepts, such as Wittgenstein's favorite example of games, can be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, concepts share a series of overlapping similarities, where no

one feature is common to all. Consider the word ‘bird’. What is the essential common feature that extends to all of the entities which we classify as birds? Neither ostriches nor penguins fly. A chicken can be plucked of its feathers. If a falcon loses its beak, does it stop being a bird? Do all birds share a disposition? Do we not consider owls wise and ravens ominous? Perhaps in first conceiving of a bird, a picture of a robin or a sparrow appeared before the mind. Why not an emu? By recognizing that concepts are not essentially bounded, the notion of family resemblances helps us resist dogmatism, remain open to new experience, and entertain new innovations in the rational expression of conceptual consciousness.

In *Line Drawings: Defining Women through Feminist Practice*, Cressida Heyes (2000) argues that Wittgensteinian conceptions can be utilized in both feminist theory and political practice in a way that allows for liberation from the dichotomy between skeptical incommensurability and the crude generalizations of dogmatism. She notes that:

[Wittgenstein] seeks to undermine linguistic essentialism by challenging both an account of language whereby terms refer to things existing as “natural kinds” in the world, and the belief, in its various forms, that meaning is constructed prior to the use of language. He raises two implicit objections to linguistic essentialism: that it relies on a priorism at the expense of empirical enquiry, and second, that linguistic essentialism is a theory that does not reflect our actual use of language. (82)

The conceptual tool of family resemblances and purposive line drawing<sup>14</sup> offers “a methodological path between two extremes: on the one hand, asserting a women’s

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<sup>14</sup> Heyes’s conception of purposive line drawing can be traced directly to §58 of *Philosophical Investigations*: “For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer

sameness in ways that minimize important power-laden differences and, on the other hand, insisting on an a priori shattering of gender categories that undercuts important feminist political theories and objectives” (13). These Wittgensteinian notions provide both “a way of reconceptualizing the similarities and differences among women” (102) and tools for halting the fragmentation between dogmatism and incommensurability.

Heyes demonstrates this in a chapter entitled “*Philosophical Investigations* (in a Feminist Voice),” a chapter that could be read as a direct rebuttal of the biologically reductive definition of the word woman espoused by pseudo-inquirer Matt Walsh and his fellow dogmatists. She begins the chapter by utilizing the Wittgensteinian methodology of numbered remarks, proposals, and rebukes to “consider the construct that we call ‘women’” (77). She writes:

Look and see what the construct for women consists of, and what women have in common. For, if you look, you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. Look, for example, at heterosexual women. They are attracted to, and may form sexual relationships with, men. Now pass to bisexual women: some features drop out and others appear! Think now of a woman of color (if you haven’t already). How is she like a white woman? And what is the relationship of a Jewish lesbian to a straight Chicana? Does a poor woman in England have anything in common with a wealthy one in South Africa? (77-78)

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does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can *draw* one; for none has so far been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you use the word “game”)... It is not everywhere circumscribed by rules; but no more are there any rules for how high one throws a ball in tennis.” Additionally, this conception can be traced §130: “The language-games are rather set up as *objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities.” A further comparison can be made to Wittgenstein’s discussion of metaphysical simples and composites in §47.

The construct of what we call ‘women’ is not bounded by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. There is a complex relation of similarities and differences that intersect with other lived experiences that include, but are not limited to, race and class.<sup>15</sup> Now, consider Matt Walsh’s definition of women as “adult human females.” Heyes writes:

But now you will say: “*This is nonsense. All women do have have something in common; namely, their bodies. Do you want to deny that?*” All right, the concept of “women” is bounded for you by the physical reality of sexed existence. It need not be so. You have given the physical character of “women” particular limits, but I can use the term so that its extension is not closed by the same frontier. This much I will allow you: some aspects of some male and female bodies are different. But why have we drawn the most important boundaries there? Why do we not draw them around other differences between us? Certainly it matters that some women menstruate, have breasts, vaginas, bear children. But do all women share these features? And how will we describe them? The physical boundaries of sex are elective foundations, supported by the walls of social practice. The discourse we weave around our bodies creates what we think of as a reality in correspondence with nature. (79)

The Wittgensteinian method proposed by Heyes allows for us to consider the political and ethical implications of how semantic boundaries are drawn, such as the dogmatic

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<sup>15</sup> Other examples Heyes includes: “A male-to-female (MTF) transsexual woman, for example, might have XY chromosomes, experience of being raised as a boy in a white, urban bourgeois nuclear family, and conventionally feminine self-presentation. A butch woman might have XX chromosomes, experience of being raised as a girl by lesbian parents in a small Northern community, and conventionally masculine self-presentation. On my Wittgensteinian-feminist view, it is not “wrong” to call them both “women” even though they do not share any common features potentially definitive of womanhood” (84).

view espoused by Matt Walsh and his ilk. In its insistence on a reductionist definition, without considering how language is actually used and the overlapping similarities and differences of the lived experience of women, it has narrowly drawn the boundary of the meaning of the word ‘woman’ to legislate identity for political purposes. It is an unsupported promotion of a form of life that significantly constrains expression, and as noted in chapter one, leads to oppression and violent political action. As Heyes further argues:

If we adopt the [Wittgensteinian] notion that women bear family resemblances to one another, we can avoid a misleading ontology that sets up mutually exclusive, bounded categories. On this account there need be no definitive set of characteristics that all women share, but rather we can understand ourselves as connected with each other by a network of overlapping similarities, some of which may be biologically real—like breasts, a vagina, a uterus, the capacity to conceive and bear a child, XX chromosomes; others of which may be more obviously constructed—like a particular relation to one’s mother, ethical attitudes, experiences of subordination and so on. But no single characteristic is necessary to make an individual, and none is sufficient. Thus, on this view, it is perfectly possible to make sense of the fact that two “distantly related individuals can both be women and share none of the same characteristics of the same except that they are called “women.” (84)

Dogmatic conceptions of language are mistaken because they do not properly reflect our actual use of language. The use of a single word for a multitude of cases and uses might mislead us into thinking that there is some common characteristic that bounds a term. It is



more accurate to note how a concept is a gathering-together of a multiplicity of instances of overlapping resemblances. A concept is also not merely the logical sum of other sub-concepts, an insight that allows for reconsideration, invention, and innovation.

Nonetheless, this is not a yielding to conventionalism, meaninglessness, or incommensurability. Rather, what sets the semantic boundary around a term is both the way and the context in which we utilize a term to convey meaning. As Wittgenstein demonstrates:

One might say the concept ‘game’ is a concept with blurred edges.—“But is a blurred concept a concept at all?”—Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need? (§71).

The Wittgensteinian methodology that Heyes promotes allows us to uproot the background assumptions of those who wish to control public discourse and expound their dogmatism. As noted by Catherine MacKinnon in an interview with *The TransActivist* (2015), “male dominant society has defined women as a discrete biological group forever. If this was going to produce liberation, we’d be free.” Most importantly, it enables us to confront language used as a tool of oppression and realize that it may always be repurposed for liberating political and discursive action. Such uses of these Wittgensteinian tools avoid both dogmatism and incommensurability. This is because they can bring a certain aspectual way of conceiving things to light, without declaring either that it is the only aspect by which a concept may be conceived, or that the aspect is merely conventional. As Heyes points out, “family resemblance generalizations should be made with self-consciousness of their own partiality and contingency in the context of

relations of power; they nonetheless select important social realities and can still be ontologically and politically justified” (186).

Noting Wittgenstein’s own penchant for enjoining his pupils to abandon academic philosophy and become actors in the world, Heyes states, “what [Wittgenstein] leaves is a ‘therapy’ in philosophy that can itself serve educational goals, but which, maybe more importantly, de-legitimizes the search for a single truth and sends us out instead to investigate multiple language-games” (102). In expounding his dogmatic views, Matt Walsh seeks to foreclose this investigation. Instead of allowing for the recognition that there is a multiplicity of language-games woven into our human form of life, dogmatism enforces its assumptions by casting skepticism toward other expressive possibilities. Further still, as noted in chapter one, this serves not only to commandeer meaning and expressive possibility, but also contributes to oppressive political action and suppression of intersubjective pursuits, such as higher education and innovative medical practice. While mistaken conceptions of language are surely not the root cause of these disturbing actions, they contribute to the entrenchment of worldviews that inspire such actions. Wittgensteinian therapeutic tools help shed light onto how our conceptual and linguistic practices are realizable and open to innovation, and, that within our shared form of life, we are mutual co-creators of culture.

I began chapter one by discussing the problems of incommensurability in public discourse and the rising visibility of dogmatists and pseudo-inquirers, such as Matt Walsh. I then aimed to validate an account of epistemic pursuit where legitimacy is secured by joint commitments to intersubjective transformative criticism. After considering some criteria for communal epistemic pursuit, such as the capacity to react to

the intersubjective transformative criticism of a multiplicity of voices, I then argued that language serves a central role in the generation of knowledge. In chapter two, by citing the public debate regarding the rigidity of semantic boundaries during the American Revolution, I aimed to show how linguistic considerations are instrumental for both the creation of culture, and for ensuring intercommunal mutual comprehension. In chapter three, I appealed to conceptions from Wittgenstein's work, namely language-games, family resemblances, and form of life, in order to show how they act as therapeutic tools for the rational and communal pursuit of knowledge and expression.

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