"I must be nothing more than the mirror in which my reader sees his own thinking with all its deformities & with this assistance can set it in order." – Ludwig Wittgenstein[1]

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Course: Mind & World (Epistemology)

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May 2014

Word count including bibliography and footnotes: 4,752 words

Word count (except bibliography and footnotes): 3,479 (within the 3,500 words limit)

Wittgensteinian Quietism
What is it?

1. Introduction

In previous centuries Quietism has primarily referred to a religious standpoint, which became heretical within the Roman Catholic Church, and is arguably closely related to the mystical tradition of Hesychasm within the Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity.[2] But Quietism became a philosophical term in the 20th century through scholarship on the century's most prominent philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the term is usually directly linked to his philosophy. Wittgensteinian Quietism is still not entirely without predecessors in philosophy; it has for example frequently been compared to ancient Pyrrhonism,[3] as well as having connections with the views of

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein (1977), *Culture and Value;* revised edition; edited by G. H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman. Revised Edition of the text by Alois Pichler; translated by Peter Winch (Malden, MA; Oxford; & Carlton, Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), p. 25e (MS 112 225: 22.11.1931).

[2] Christian Quietists and Hesychasts put great emphasis on silent prayer and stillness in spiritual matters. Their views have been distorted and ridiculed by their adversaries.

[3] The ancient Greek philosopher Pyrrho (c. 360 BC – c. 270 BC) became to embrace a form of scepticism and he originated a school of thought which bears his name. – With regard to certain problems, Gilbert Ryle and John L. Austin could be regarded as proto-Quietists.

the Danish 19th century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who had a great impact on Wittgenstein.[4]

In this essay I will account for the concept of Wittgensteinian Quietism in philosophy and I will describe its basic features.

In his book *The Future for Philosophy* the American philosopher Brian Leiter identifies two major metaphilosophical standpoints of modern philosophers, at least within the Anglo-sphere: Naturalism and Quietism.[5] The term Naturalism in this broad metaphilosophical sense refers to an approach to philosophy where philosophical problems are real in the same way as problems in the natural sciences.[6] The term Quietism, on the other hand, refers to a position where philosophical problems are, broadly speaking, of a fundamentally different kind: resulting from linguistic confusions and in need of being dissolved in a remedial or therapeutic way rather than being solved analogously to mathematical or scientific problems.

Leiter puts himself firmly in the Naturalistic camp along with majority of philosophers. Still, Wittgensteinian Quietism has had a few very reputable advocates, in particular Norman Malcolm, Peter Hacker, Richard Rorty and John McDowell.[7] Rorty responded positively to Leiter's observation in the paper "Naturalism and Quietism", which was published in his book *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Rorty's Quietism, however, is different from Leiter's description of it, as he explains in a passage which has become famous:

> I think Leiter's account of the standoff between these two camps is largely accurate. He has identified the deepest and most intractable difference of opinion within contemporary Anglophone philosophy. But his account is

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[4] An important book which demonstrates the intellectual affinities between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein is *A Confusion of the Sphere: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* by Genia Schönbaumsfeld, published in 2007 (Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press).

[5] I prefer to write these metaphilosophical standpoints with a capital letter.

[6] The philosophical problems in question have to do with the nature of reality, the nature of mind, the nature of knowledge, the nature of action, the nature of morality, etc.

[7] Wittgenstein never used the term, but philosophical Quietism can be traced to his statements about philosophy and to a reasonable interpretation of his writings. Peter Hacker does not use the term either, but his metaphilosophical views, which are influenced by Wittgenstein, are *de facto* very Quietist in character. Rorty and McDowell have both accepted to be labelled as Quietists, although the latter has distanced himself from certain conceptions of Quietism. Norman Malcolm, who was a student and a close friend of Wittgenstein, took a Quietist approach in certain areas, particularly within philosophy of mind.

> misleading in one respect. Most people who think of themselves in the quietist camp, as I do, would hesitate to say that the problems studied by our activist colleagues are *unreal*. They do not divide philosophical problems into the real and illusory, but rather into those that retain some relevance to cultural politics and those that do not. Quietists, at least those of my sect, think that such relevance needs to be demonstrated before a problem is taken seriously.[8]

Such socially pragmatist conception of Quietism might be common, as Rorty claims, but it does not represent the Quietism of Wittgenstein, Malcolm, Hacker and McDowell, which are better representatives of Leiter's description of Quietism than Rorty is. Wittgenstein was admittedly concerned with cultural politics, but in a much more indirect and less crude way than Rorty; his realism has ultimately to do with the true nature of things, linguistic confusions and the mental-block characteristics of philosophical problems. Although Hacker is arguably less concerned with cultural politics than Wittgenstein, his views on the issue are based on wide-ranging scholarship on Wittgenstein – and the real-illusionary distinction describes his Quietism much better than the relevance-yardstick of Rorty. McDowell has partly a pragmatist approach to Quietism but hardly of a social or cultural pedigree; his approach is in fact closer to Wittgenstein's realism than to Rorty's pragmatism.[9] In this essay I will leave Rorty's Quietism aside and focus on the Quietism of Wittgenstein and McDowell.

2. Wittgenstein

If modern philosophical Quietism has a cornerstone passage it is section 133 in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations:*

> [T]he clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.
>
> The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophising when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. […]

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8   Rorty (2007), p. 149. – Rorty adds that his view "is a corollary of the maxim that what does not make a difference to practice should not make a difference to philosophers." (Ibid.)

9   Rorty's Quietism can at least be traced to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), which is a very interesting book from a metaphilosophical point of view. His Quietism becomes more radical in his later writings.

> There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were.[10]

To acquire complete clarity and to give philosophy a peace, as Wittgenstein puts it, is essential to his metaphilosophical views. His goal was not grand philosophical constructions, but intellectual quietude, where he would not be tormented by philosophical problems. This desire of intellectual quietude is the source of the Quietist label and what primarily links Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical views to ancient Pyrrhonism. However, he may well have agreed with for instance Hacker and McDowell that this is an endless struggle; philosophy will hardly be rest to peace once and for all because language will relentlessly trick people into new confusions, pseudo-problems in need of being dissolved.

Wittgenstein also mentions in section 133 the plurality of methods, but one category of methods dominated his philosophy, namely the methods of *grammatical clarifications*, which provides a necessary overview or *Übersicht* in German. Wittgenstein compares such activity to a therapy and a successful outcome would be an eliminations of confusions, a state of mind where problems disappear and things become clear and unproblematic again. Much of the mystery in philosophy is the result of bewitchment of words – we get stuck in the web of grammar.[11] "A philosophical problem," according to Wittgenstein, "has the form: "I don't know my way about.""[12] and such problems arise when, metaphorically speaking, "language *goes on holiday.*"[13] The metaphor becomes lucid when Wittgenstein discusses the proper home of language, i.e. the environment where words acquire meaning:

> When philosophers use a word – "knowledge", "being", "object", "I", "proposition/sentence", "name" – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing,

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[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), *Philosophical Investigations;* revised 4th Edition; translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Peter Hacker and Joachim Schulte; edited by Peter Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), § 133 (p. 57e).

[11] In § 109 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein says the following: "The problems are solved, not by coming up with new discoveries, but by assembling what we have long been familiar with. Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language." (p. 52e).

[12] Wittgenstein (1953), § 123 (p. 55e).

[13] Ibid., § 38 (p. 23e).

> one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home?[14]

Wittgenstein wanted philosophers to "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."[15] The everyday use of a term casts light on its function, the meaning is determined by how it is *used* in a certain language community. Examples of usage can be important in acquiring grammatical clarity and overview by casting light on a variety of different meanings, which are not connected through a "common denominator" but through an overlapping web of meanings, affinity which Wittgenstein calls "family resemblance".[16]

Wittgenstein's Quietist approach is most discernible in his later philosophy, but it is not absent from his earlier work, as for example David G. Stern, has demonstrated, although his Quietism is different in his earlier philosophy where the focus is on what can be said by proposition and what can only be shown.[17]

Wittgenstein was very critical of those philosophers he blamed for increasing confusion by twisting the meaning of words instead of providing therapy by untying "knots in our thinking" and thus dissolving problems.[18] Among contemporary philosophers who are least guilty of such accusation is John McDowell, whose Quietism I will account for next.

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[14] Ibid., § 116 (p. 53e). – In a similar vein, Wittgenstein says in § 124 that "[p]hilosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. / For it cannot justify it either. / It leaves everything as it is." (p. 55e).

[15] Ibid.), § 116 (p. 53e).

[16] Family resemblance is a key concept in Wittgenstein's later philosophy and important for the Quietist methodology. – "We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (§ 66). / "I can think of no better expression to characterise these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way" (§ 67). / "But if someone wished to say: "There is something common to all these constructions – namely the disjunction of all their common properties" – I should reply; Now you are only playing with words. One might as well say: "Something runs through the whole thread – namely the continuous overlapping of these fibres"" (§ 67).

[17] David G. Stern (2004), *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp. 40-55. – Stern uses the term Pyrrhonism for what is here called Quietism.

[18] Ludwig Wittgenstein (1967), *Zettel;* edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and Georg Henrik von Wright (Oakland, CA: University of California Press), § 452.

3. John McDowell

A good insight into McDowell's quietism can be found in his introduction to *Mind and World*.[19] The first hint of a Quietist approach appears in section 1 of the introduction where he states the aim of the book:

> My aim is to propose an account, in a diagnostic spirit, of some characteristic anxieties of modern philosophy – anxieties that centre, as my title indicates, on the relation between mind and world. Continuing with the medical metaphor, we might say that a satisfactory diagnosis ought to point towards a cure. I aim at explaining how it comes about that we seem to be confronted with philosophical obligations of a sort, and I want the explanation to enable us to unmask that appearance as illusion.[20]

In this paragraph McDowell expresses a conception of his philosophical task which is very similar to Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical views. The medical metaphors of "diagnostic spirit", "anxieties of modern philosophy", "cure", and "unmasking appearance as illusion" are characteristic of Wittgenstein who used such metaphors frequently, not only by constantly likening philosophy to therapy but also in a more direct way, for example when he compares the act of dealing with philosophical problems with a treatment of illness: "The philosopher treats a question, like an illness."[21]

In section 5 McDowell repeats that his "aim is diagnosis, with a view of cure" and he talks about a "cure" of "philosophical anxiety" by "resolving tension".[22] The tension he refers to is a result of a state of affairs that seems problematic from a philosophical point of view, but the problem is dissolved when McDowell reminds the reader of aspects that are missing from the description of the world in which the problem emerges.[23] Such easing of philosophical tension by providing a broader and fuller picture of affairs is typical of Wittgenstein's treatment of problems and indeed

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[19] John McDowell (1994), *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). – The introduction was first published in the paperback edition of 1996.

[20] Ibid., p. xi.

[21] Wittgenstein (1953), § 255 (p. 98e)

[22] McDowell (1994), p. xvi.

[23] Ibid., p. xx. – "The mistake here is to forget that nature includes *second nature*. Human beings acquire a second nature in part by being initiated into conceptual capacities, whose interrelations belong in the logical space of reasons." (Ibid.)

essential to the Quietist methodology along with the before-mentioned grammatical clarifications. The final section of the introduction confirms unequivocally the Quietist nature of McDowell's philosophical approach, as is evident from the following noteworthy passage:

> "How possible?" questions whose felt urgency derives from a frame of mind that, if explicitly thought through, would yield materials for an argument that what the questions are asked about is impossible. Evidently it can seem sensible to embark on such a project only if one does not quite understand the predicament that seems to motivate it. If the frame of mind is left in place, one cannot show how whatever it is that one is asking about is possible; if the frame of mind is dislodged, the "How possible?" question no longer has the point it seemed to have. Either way, there is no prospect of answering the question as it was putatively meant. So if I am right about the character of the philosophical anxieties I aim to deal with, there is no room for doubt that engaging in "constructive philosophy", in this sense, is not the way to approach them. As I have put it, we need to exorcize the questions rather than set about answering them. Of course that takes hard work: if you like, constructive philosophy in another sense.

To add information and/or change the perspective in order to "exorcize" or quiet the apparent problems which prompt philosophical questions could hardly be more in line with the core approach of Wittgensteinian Quietism. Such a project can be seen as a constructive philosophy of a kind, as McDowell points out, and it is neither trivial nor easy task, but important and "hard work", as he makes clear.

In 2009 McDowell published a paper called "Wittgensteinian "Quietism","" where he addressed some issues with regard to Quietism and distanced himself from certain conceptions of it while clinging firmly to what has here been described as his Quietist views. McDowell begins the paper by quoting Wittgenstein: "The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose." He then quotes favourably another passage by Wittgenstein where the argument is rejected that such metaphilosophical standpoint turns "a blind eye to all that is grand and interesting in philosophy":

> Where does this investigation get its importance from, given that it seems only to destroy everything interesting: that is, all that is great and important? (As it were, all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) But what we are destroying are only houses of cards, and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stood.[24]

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[24] Wittgenstein (1953), § 118 (p. 54e).

So, the Quietist philosopher in the spirit of Wittgenstein and McDowell should not be interpreted as someone who does not care about truth in philosophy, but someone who wants to erase falsehoods, "destroy houses of cards" that get in the way of understanding and thus clear the ground for more accurate account of the world and more truthful perspectives.

However, McDowell also makes crucial qualifications, which he does think are in line with an elaborated interpretation of Wittgenstein. Firstly, we should not conceive of philosophy so narrowly that it consists *only* on a therapeutic approach, because philosophy is a broad and diverse subject, and there are modes of doing philosophy and fields within philosophy where the Quietist approach is misplaced: "Think, for instance, of reflection about the requirements of justice or the proper shape for a political community."[25] Rather, McDowell claims that Wittgenstein is referring to "a particular mode of philosophical activity."[26]

Secondly, the "sickness" of confusion and card-house-building in philosophy is a more ambiguous phenomenon than a crude mind would think. They are often a result of the logical structure of language and they can, together with the therapeutic corrections, increase our understanding. In other words, by reflecting on the problems and dissolving them we are not on the same level as we would have been if the problems would never have been raised; rather we have advanced our understanding through engaging with them.

David G. Stern focuses on this ambiguity in his book on Wittgenstein. He identifies three voices in the *Philosophical Investigations*. According to traditional interpretation the voices are two, the voice of Wittgenstein and the voice of Wittgenstein's interlocutor. Stern, however, divides the voice of Wittgenstein into two different voices:

> On the one hand we have the voice of Wittgenstein's narrator – who does argue for positive philosophical theses – and on the other hand we have Wittgenstein's commentator […] who dismisses philosophical problems and compares his way of doing philosophy to therapy.[27]

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[25] McDowell (2007), p. 367.

[26] Ibid., p. 367.

[27] Stern (2004), p. 5.

Stern argues that the "argumentative aspect" of the narrator and the "therapeutic aspect" of the commentator are "complementary and interwoven",[28] which seems to be exactly McDowell's point in his paper on Quietism, as is stressed in the clearest way in the final paragraph: "So [genuine Wittgensteinian Quietism] needs a precise and sympathetic appreciation of the temptations it aims to deconstruct. There is no question of quickly dismissing a range of philosophical activity from the outside."[29]

The strategic point of the argumentative voice, according to Stern, "only emerges once we see that the *Philosophical Investigations* has more in common with a Socratic dialogue, or an Augustinian confession, than a conventional philosophical treatise."[30] Such qualification is arguably in Wittgenstein's mind when he writes the following: "The results of philosophy are the discovery of some piece of plain nonsense and the bumps that the understanding has got by running up against the limits of language. They – these bumps – make us see the value of that discovery."[31]

Still, it is vital to keep in mind that Wittgenstein's constructive philosophy serves a particular purpose in relation to his therapeutic approach and Wittgenstein is not arguing for a need of a substantive account, which he himself did not provide. A central aim of McDowell's paper from 2007 is to distance himself from such conception of Wittgensteinian Quietism:

> The label is all right if all it conveys is the aim of quieting the felt need for substantive philosophy. But it has acquired currency in readings in which Wittgenstein is complimented (a bit backhandedly) for uncovering a requirement, in connection with such topics as acting on an understanding,

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[28] Stern (2004), p. 5.

[29] McDowell (2007), p. 372.

[30] Stern (2004), p. 6.

[31] Wittgenstein (1953), § 119 (p. 54e).

for substantive philosophy, which, however, in deference to a supposed antecedent commitment to quietism, he does not himself give.[32]

McDowell considers such understanding of Wittgensteinian Quietism to be "point-missing" and he explains the quotation marks in the title of the paper in this context, i.e. to "signal dissent" from such interpretation of Quietism, an interpretation which in a way portrays Wittgenstein of being either too slothful, idle or indifferent to further advance a substantive philosophy, and thus leaving to others to finish a valuable philosophical construction.

In the final two pages of the paper, McDowell states his own interpretation of Wittgensteinian Quietism, which is clearly identical to McDowell's own metaphilosophical views:

> Wittgenstein's quietism is not a refusal to engage in substantive philosophy in the face of what everyone has to accept as genuine problems. It is an activity of diagnosing, so as to explain away, some appearances that we are confronted with genuine problems. The supposed problems disappear, leaving no need for theory construction to make things "less mysterious."[33]

Thus, McDowell maintains that essential to Quietism is a suspicion of "philosopher's questions," a suspicion which should naturally arise "before we even start interesting ourselves in the specifics of how they are answered."[34] What should follow from an initial suspicion is a therapeutical working hypothesis:

> Quietism does indeed urge us not to engage in certain supposed tasks, but precisely because it require us to work at showing that they are not necessary. And it is indeed work. Therapeutic philosophy is designed to spare us the travails of positive philosophy[.]

This is the core of a genuine Wittgensteinian Quietism, according to McDowell, a Quietism rightly conceived, where no quotation marks are needed.

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[32] McDowell (2007), p. 370. – McDowell then mentions Crispin Wright and Robert Brandom as examples of philosophers who understand Wittgensteinian Quietism in the wrong way: "In a variant version of this tendency, Crispin Wright credits Wittgenstein with an "official" quietism – leaving room for the suggestion that, inconsistently with his "official" stance, Wittgenstein actually at least adumbrates the supposedly needed substantive philosophy. Robert Brandom thinks Wittgenstein's reflections on rule following reveal the need for "an account … of what it is for norms to be implicit in practices," though Wittgenstein himself, "the principled theoretical quietist," neglects to provide such a thing. Brandom undertakes to fill this supposed lacuna, with Wittgenstein's reflections supposedly motivating an enormous project in positive philosophy that quietism somehow debars him from undertaking himself." (Ibid.)

[33] Ibid., p. 371.

[34] Ibid.

4. Conclusion

I have now given an overview of Quietism, particularly in relation to its founder, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and one major contemporary philosopher who is for the most part true to Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical standpoint, John McDowell. The latter follows in the footsteps of the former, so my discussion of McDowell is unavoidably steeped in discussion of Wittgenstein.

In my introduction I set the ground by mentioning Brian Leiter's claim that Naturalism and Quietism are the two competing metaphilosophical schools of thought in our times. Then I speak about Richard Rorty's reply to Leiter, where he agrees with Leiter except that he understands Quietism in a more pragmatist way that Leiter does. Next I turn my attention to the origin of modern Quietism in Wittgenstein's philosophy and finally I discuss the views of McDowell, who I claim is a good representative of Wittgensteinian Quietism. In fact, we can talk about Wittgenstein-McDowell orthodoxy within the Quietist school of thought. To conclude, I will now, based on my previous discussion, describe the basic features of that orthodoxy:

1. Quietism does not necessarily apply to every mode of philosophy within every field of philosophy. It is a working hypothesis rooted in an a priori scepticism of philosophical problems, especially in areas where putative problems are likely to be the result of linguistic and conceptual confusions.

2. The Quietist approach is a remedial or therapeutic approach to philosophy, where apparent problems are dissolved by various methods, particularly by providing grammatical clarifications and broader pictures of states of affairs.

3. With regard to philosophical problems where the Quietist approach applies the Quietist philosopher does not believe in a need for substantive philosophy. Still, philosophical constructions can be intertwined with the therapeutic approach and thus they can play a role in advancing our understanding. But the apparent problems which stimulate the constructions disappear when the clarifying methods of Quietism have been applied.

4. Ultimately, the aim of the Quietist is to bring intellectual quietude with regard to philosophical questions which are shown to result from bewitchment of words or a narrow outlook.

The last mentioned fact about Quietist orthodoxy, the intellectual quietude, can be further advanced to include an ethical dimension, which would be in line with

Wittgenstein's claim that he was first and foremost an ethical thinker.[35] The focus of the ethics of Quietism is on the increased authenticity that emerges when deceptions and illusions have been erased. Genia Schönbaumsfeld captures beautifully the core of the ethical side of Quietism in the following passage on Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard:

> I will show that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard are united in their common aim of paving the way, in their writings, for an *authentic existence* – an existence that is free of self-deception and illusion. In both authors, I will argue, this rigorous demand is an ethical one, and, although both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard would agree that philosophy cannot help one to become the kind of person capable of leading such a life, it can certainly clear away the conceptual confusions and obstacles that might stand in the way of leading it. Indeed, it seems to me that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard both desire the kind of reader for whom, ideally, philosophical clarity *would* lead to *existential* clarity, that is, to a breakdown of the distinction between a 'contemplative' and 'partisan' conception of philosophy.[36]

Schönbaumsfeld's last sentence on the breakdown between a contemplative and partisan conception of philosophy is a point where some friction might appear between Wittgenstein and McDowell. My suspicion is that Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical views are in a sense less objective than McDowell's views. No philosopher expects to open the morning newspaper and see on the front page that ethics, metaphysics, epistemology or any other field within philosophy has finally been put on a stable ground so that major disagreements should disappear. Indeed such news would sound ridiculous to overwhelming majority of reputable philosophers. Still, many philosophers are forgetful in their daily activities of their total lack of such expectation. In other words, they strive towards objectivity that they deep down find ridiculous. Overall estimation of Wittgenstein's and McDowell's *oeuvre* leads me to the verdict that Wittgenstein was less self-deluding and more profound in his metaphilosophy than McDowell.

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[35] See e.g. Schönbaumsfeld (2007), pp. 10-83 (Chapter 1: "Kierkegaard's Influence on Wittgenstein's Thought; and Chapter 2: "The Point of Philosophical Authorship").

[36] Ibid., p. 13.

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