

## LEAVIS AND THE WITTGENSTEINIANS

As Christopher Ricks argues (*E in C*, October, 1976), 'we have great good fortune in having a critic' such as Leavis, and no doubt the emphasis in any review of *The Living Principle* ought to be upon the critical achievement. A large part of Leavis's case, however, presents a 'new insistence . . . prompted by the Wittgensteinians' (p.13), and when that case radically misrepresents both Wittgenstein and certain 'Wittgensteinians', perhaps a little more should be said.

Leavis makes three main points: that 'the Cartesian-Newtonian dualism must be exorcized from the Western mind' (p.31); that language is a 'living actuality that is organically one with the "human world"' (p.58); and that both Wittgenstein and the 'Wittgensteinians' are 'naïve about language' (p.57). Of the three points, two concern Wittgenstein directly: the question of dualism, and the nature of meaning.

As far as the Cartesian model of mind is concerned, Leavis completely ignores the fact that Wittgenstein contributed as much as any philosopher this century to the criticism of dualism. Descartes argued that an individual mind may recognise its own thoughts and experiences without at the same time considering the reality of the external world and other minds. It is simply a fact that Wittgenstein, in rejecting the private language thesis in his *Philosophical Investigations* – a thesis which was only possible if one accepted the classical naming theory of language – fundamentally qualified both dualism and behaviourism, raising important problems for Cartesian, empiricist and utilitarian traditions in philosophy.

Wittgenstein's contribution to discussion of the meaning of meaning is even more blatantly ignored by Leavis. When Leavis asks 'How do words mean?' (p.57) and talks of language 'as a living actuality that is organically one with the "human world"' (p.58), in what sense is he fundamentally opposed to Wittgenstein's theory of meaning in *Philosophical Investigations*? There, Wittgenstein rejects the picture-theory of language as given in Augustine's *Confessions* – i.e. that sentences are combinations of names – and in the language-games theory suggests that words cannot be understood apart from their non-linguistic human context: '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' (*Philosophical Investigations*: 43). Thus, to give an illustration: on the picture-theory model of language, 'obeying an order' involves a causal relation between word and action. Wittgenstein questioned this on the grounds that if the relation were causal, there could be no possibility of 'disobeying an order' and hence of ever 'obeying an order'. Similarly, it would be impossible to have an intention in a game of chess without a context within which such intentions were meaningful. 'An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions' (*Philosophical Investigations*: 337). The significance of all of this for aesthetics is well known and has been discussed at length by John Casey in *The Language of Criticism*. The significance for the Cartesian theory of mind is simply ignored by Leavis, and one can only state flatly that the importance accorded to Grene and Polanyi points to a considerable misunderstanding.

The most difficult part of Leavis's argument concerns the 'adequacy' of the Wittgensteinian model of language. According to Leavis, both Wittgenstein himself and 'the Wittgensteinians' are naïve about language, their naivety representing an

'inadequacy falsifying in a way inimical to thought' (p.13). In the context of *The Living Principle*, the 'thought' referred to is presumably 'heuristic' thought – what John Wisdom calls 'reflective knowledge' – and in the absence of any published literary criticism of the kind Leavis is defending as a form of knowledge, it is rather difficult to prove that Wittgenstein himself had an 'adequate' understanding of such 'thought'. Unfortunately for Leavis's case, certain 'Wittgensteinians' *have* produced precisely such a body of work, and their achievement in both aesthetics and practical criticism ought to be insistently recognised by anyone reading *The Living Principle*. Surely it would be agreed that Rush Rhees, Renford Bambrough, R.W. Beardsmore, D.Z. Phillips and Michael Weston are all 'Wittgensteinians'? They have produced a body of both theoretical and practical criticism (1) which achieves much of what Leavis himself considers imperative. As a piece of concrete evidence in the face of Leavis's generalizations, I would suggest that Leavis's treatment of Conrad in *The Living Principle* should be compared with Michael Weston's handling of the same difficulties in *Morality and the Self*. The critiques of Hare's purposive model of ethical behaviour given both here and in Beardsmore's *Art and Morality* seem to me to be among the finest literary criticism published in recent years, and completely in the spirit and intellectual framework of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*.

- (1) Cf. Rush Rhees, *Without Answers* (London, 1969); Renford Bambrough, 'Literature and Philosophy in *Wisdom: Twelve Essays*, ed. Renford Bambrough (Oxford, 1974); R.W. Beardsmore, 'Learning from a Novel' in *Philosophy and the Arts: Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, Volume 6, 1971/72* (London 1973), and *Art and Morality* (London, 1971); D.Z. Phillips,

'Allegiance and Change in Morality: A Study in Contrasts' in *Philosophy and the Arts* (ibid); Michael Weston, *Morality and the Self* (Oxford, 1975).