

Derrida and Wittgenstein: Points of Opposition

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The radicality of the challenges posed by Wittgenstein and Derrida to traditional philosophical approaches has provoked a number of comparisons of the two. There have been over a dozen such studies published, two of book length. One comes to these studies hoping for a “productive confrontation” between Wittgenstein and Derrida, to use Ruth Sonderegger’s phrase.¹ The aim of the first two parts of this paper is to review these studies. Focusing primarily on the book-length studies, I will examine the problems they present and see what lessons are to be learned from them. Ultimately, we will find that the hoped-for confrontation never takes place. In the third part, I will set forth the issues in which Derrida and Wittgenstein meet in their points of closest opposition. These are the issues which will need to be addressed in order to bring about such a confrontation.

Over-writing Wittgenstein: Henry Staten’s *Wittgenstein and Derrida*

In his book, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, Henry Staten proposes that we read Derrida “as an ally of Wittgenstein” (1984, xiv). He claims that, in his later phase, Wittgenstein had achieved “a consistent deconstructive standpoint” (1). The parallel is drawn this way: Staten says that Wittgenstein’s method is a “regulated leakage across the boundaries of established categories,” whereas deconstruction is “a regulated overflowing of established categories” (24). Nevertheless, Staten claims that Wittgenstein falls short of Derrida, as he (L.W.)

“remained trapped by the urge toward final liberation...” (3). Staten sees certain dangers in Derrida’s style, dangers that Derrida himself avoids, but that suggests that “we can use each to supplement the other” (3). Staten thus believes that Derrida and Wittgenstein are engaged in convergent, and not antagonistic, projects, although he gives the edge to Derrida in the way this project is carried out.

We need to look at Staten’s exposition of Derrida in order to see what is the “deconstructive position” that Wittgenstein is supposed to have attained. This position is one of attaining a “modernist” functioning of language—deconstruction is a kind of “textual labor” (31). Staten points out that deconstruction is not a denial or refutation of philosophy (47)—an especially valuable point given the many misreadings of Derrida. Instead, deconstruction consists of “shifts of emphasis” (47), “an alternate description of a set of phenomena” (53).² This “figure-field switch” is one where one focuses on the necessary possibility of accidents as having philosophical significance. (16) This alternate description strives to “hold onto the classical concepts while stretching them to include what they were expressly designed to exclude...” (53).

Staten emphasizes the importance of issues concerning time in drawing together Wittgenstein and Derrida. Both Derrida and Wittgenstein are on the side of the “spatio-temporal” (22) and “the flux” (21) against the timelessness of ideal objectivities (21) and the atemporal (80). Staten brings in context and “before” and “after” in analyzing temporality in Wittgenstein (81). Why only “before” and “after”? Why not “past” and “future”? The treatment of temporal issues is minimal and sketchy. Nor does Staten discuss Wittgenstein’s own comments on time or change. (We will have occasion to return to this point.)

From a Wittgensteinian point of view, there are some problematic aspects of Staten’s exposition of Derrida. One is his claim that deconstruction not merely arises out of, but is intrinsically related to phenomenology. “The phenomenological reduction is a moment essential to the emergence of deconstruction.” (58).³ This is problematic because Husserl’s writing seems such an easy target for a Wittgenstein-style dissolution. Another is the claimed use of a model in his statement that “Derrida thinks the sign as the trace of difference and then proceeds to interpret object perception on this model” (58). It is precisely for its use of models that Wittgenstein takes philosophy to task.

Of course, this is not Staten’s “Wittgenstein” and to bring it

in here without discussing his conception would be to beg the question. Staten opposes what he calls the “orthodox normalization” of Wittgenstein with an interpretation which stresses Wittgenstein as wanting to open up “new paths”—“what he said he wanted, not to save others the trouble of thinking, but to stimulate them to thoughts of their own” (65). Staten’s interpretation stresses Wittgenstein’s style, his use of irony and metaphor, and the “zigzag” movement of his discussions. “This activity is aesthetic” (85). “Philosophy, done this way, is like a form of poetry or collage” (86).

Staten grants some legitimacy to the “orthodox normalization”: “It will usually be possible to refute the deconstructive reading of a given remark with an orthodox philosophical interpretation. Nor is such orthodox interpretation simply wrong. There is always more than one thing going on in Wittgenstein’s language” (65).⁴ This seems highly problematic; I believe there are two confusions here. First, of course it’s true that Wittgenstein’s texts can legitimately give rise to varying interpretations, but if we are to see Wittgenstein and Derrida as “allies,” the way Staten wants to, then we will be seeing them as sharing a metaphilosophical project, and this is incompatible with merely pointing out a deconstructive “moment” in Wittgenstein’s texts. Second, Staten includes all of the current interpretations of Wittgenstein within the single category of “orthodox normalization.”⁵ “The orthodox normalization of Wittgenstein begins by scorning as an “aberration” Wittgenstein’s “revulsion at the thought of himself as a philosophical theorist” and treating his work as it does that of any other philosopher” (65; Staten is quoting Anthony Quinton). This conflates interpretations which stress Wittgenstein’s dissolution of philosophical problems with those which use his arguments to build philosophical foundations anew. These are both traditional interpretations of Wittgenstein, but the first stresses his anti-philosophical animus rather than ignoring it as an aberration. Staten only mentions the “dissolving” of philosophical problems once (75), but never discusses it.⁶ None of this counts against offering a new interpretation of Wittgenstein, but it does suggest too much has been omitted by Staten to accept his conclusions.

Staten’s reading of Wittgenstein imposes ideas taken from Derrida on Wittgenstein’s text. Staten comes close to saying so: “Most of the words have been Wittgenstein’s, but I have been continually guided by the patterns of Derrida’s text” (107). Staten actually goes farther than he admits as he interpolates Derridean terms into his reading of Wittgenstein. For example, when interpreting Wittgenstein’s passages

on reading, he says: “It is only of the activity as a whole that we say it is reading—and the activity as a whole is infected by what is not reading. Reading is, for example, intertwined with ‘reciting from memory’” (84). He then quotes in support of this reading part of section 161 from *Philosophical Investigations* which says that there is a “continuous series of transitional cases between that in which a person repeats from memory what he is supposed to be reading, and that in which he spells out every word without being helped at all by guessing from the context or knowing by heart” (184). The words “intertwined” and “infected,” used by Staten in his paraphrase, are recognizably Derridean; they are not in the passage quoted. Staten has over-written Wittgenstein with Derridean patterns of thought and key-words from Derrida.

Stephen Mulhall’s reading of the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* falls into this pattern as well (2000). Mulhall believes that the *Investigations* poses “an invitation and a challenge” to deconstruction. The invitation is to find in the *Investigations* a less metaphysical version of ordinary language philosophy. The challenge is to recognize Wittgenstein as engaged in the same project as Derrida. Here I will deal with the “invitation.”

Let’s consider the following passage from the beginning of Mulhall’s interpretation, after he cites Wittgenstein’s quotation of Augustine at the beginning of the *Investigations*. I will highlight certain words on which I wish to focus attention.

So taken, Wittgenstein’s *gesture* questions this sense of self-evidence, *implying* that, if these words of Augustine require a philosophical response from him, then we cannot say in advance that any uses of words—and hence any aspects of human culture and experience—are beyond (his conception of) philosophy’s interest. On the other hand, the very act of citing a passage from another’s text necessarily *points* one’s reader towards the uncited remainder of that text; encountering those words in their new context thereby *invites* us to reconsider the relation between them and their old context. So taken, Wittgenstein’s *gesture* might be taken to *ask*... (409, emphasis added)

Mulhall refers to Wittgenstein’s “gesture,” and what this gesture is taken to be “implying”: specifically what Wittgenstein does not say but what he supposedly does or indicates. This is emphasized when Mulhall says that what Wittgenstein does “points” towards something, “invites” us

to do something, again his “gesture” “asks” something. Additional hesitation is added by the “might be taken to ask” in the last line; this is repeated throughout the paper as Mulhall qualifies his claims with similar qualifications: “might then imply” (409), “we might realize that Wittgenstein’s” (412), “then we might say that” (413). There are other such hedges in the paper, but these are sufficient to establish the point: Mulhall throughout is talking about what he takes to be implicit (he uses this word on 414), rather than about what Wittgenstein explicitly says.

The content is then supplied by Derrida. In the above quote, the word “questions” and the word “response” are key Derridean terms. The use of neither of these terms is justified by Mulhall. But the combination of ignoring what is explicit in Wittgenstein in favor of what is supposedly implicit, along with the interpolation of Derridean terms, allows Mulhall to make Wittgenstein say the opposite of what he traditionally is taken to say: that no uses of language or aspects of experience are beyond philosophy’s interest. No mention is made of Wittgenstein’s desire to end philosophy, to dissolve all philosophical problems, which would instead “imply” the opposite of what Mulhall says. Philosophy should not involve itself with any uses of language or aspects of experience because philosophy just mucks things up.

Very briefly, mention should be made of another possible sub-category along the same lines as “over-writing” Wittgenstein: that of “over-writing” Derrida. Two readings fall into this category, those of Rorty and Mulligan. From his earliest writings on Derrida, Rorty interpreted him as a “French Wittgenstein.”⁷ However, he gives up this interpretation in his review of Bennington’s *Jacques Derrida*, where he admits that such a reading leaves out the “quasi-transcendental” side of Derrida’s work. He tries to write this side off as following from a particular psychological disposition, but nevertheless admits that it is part of the work.⁸ Mulligan’s paper is similarly half-hearted. In pushing his Wittgensteinian interpretation of Derrida, he never once quotes Derrida’s text, and in the end admits that his interpretation has to jettison much of Derrida’s work such as his new “philosophemes”—the quasi-transcendentals, and Derrida’s privileging of “speaking” as the pre-eminent metaphysical ploy (rather than as one among others), which supposedly “is not without its own very definite metaphysical presuppositions.”⁹ Both Rorty and Mulligan recognize Wittgenstein as a philosopher aiming to dissolve problems, and both try to over-write (override) Derrida with this version of Wittgenstein, but their admissions

of what is left out of their interpretation show the impossibility of reading Derrida in this way.

At work in all of these studies is the urge to see Wittgenstein and Derrida as saying the same thing. This urge leads these philosophers to interpret either Wittgenstein or Derrida by using terms drawn from one to the exclusion of the philosophical project of the other. What is remarkable is that even when the specificity of and difference between Wittgenstein's and Derrida's metaphilosophical views is recognized and accurately delineated, the authors override the differences in their overall assessments. This is what happens in the papers of Truong Rootham and Law.

Truong Rootham correctly shows how Derrida and Wittgenstein's positions differ radically when she shows that Wittgenstein is anti-philosophical, trying to bring language use back from metaphysical uses which give rise to pseudo-problems and pseudo-statements. In contrast, she notes that for Derrida, "ordinary language and ordinary concepts are marked by western metaphysics and carry along with them all kinds of presuppositions which are *inseparable* from the system" (1996, 36-37). This contrast allows her to pose the comparison in terms of the relation between metaphysical and ordinary use of language: "Derrida, however, would not talk of 'expunging metaphysical use' because that would suggest a metaphysical use separate from, and having no bearing on, ordinary use, where he sees on the contrary, an unending web of inextricable uses all affecting one another (34). In Truong Rootham's approach, we can see the key point of conflict underlying the differences in Wittgenstein's and Derrida's metaphilosophical positions. The challenge, as I see it, is to figure out how to decide which claim is correct.¹⁰

Truong Rootham doesn't move in this direction, however; instead, she tries to mediate the dispute by bringing the two into alignment. In order to do so she has to lop off their metaphilosophical positions. First she jettisons Derrida's view that all of philosophy and common sense is imbued with metaphysics: "In many ways, pruned of its paranoid character, Derrida's philosophy does boil down to Wittgenstein's more prosaic criticism of our 'craving for generality' (Blue Book: 17) and of our pathological need for clear-cut distinctions..." (42). Then she purges Wittgenstein of his conception of dissolving problems: "The deconstructive laboring of concepts is analogous in its spirit to the new role Wittgenstein defines for philosophy—that of 'giving sense', as long as the 'expunging' of metaphysical use is played

down” (44). She dispenses with these differences to emphasize what she takes to be the point of agreement between the two which she calls “autonomy of grammar.” I am not going to deal with this (highly problematic) claim, except to note that she draws it out of the ‘spirit’ of deconstruction. What’s relevant here is that she fails to explain why this commonality, assuming that it is there, is so much more important than the differences that they can be ignored.

Jules Law unerringly zeroes in on the key difference between Derrida’s and Wittgenstein’s methods. Deconstruction keeps an aporia open by “complicating its original premises” (1989, 140), whereas Wittgenstein tries to dissolve aporias by looking at the differing uses of words (141, 163). He is right in noting the key similarity that both believe that “our language about language can in no fundamental way differ from our language in general” (142). But this doesn’t prevent Law from describing, in a striking manner, their

...antithetical attitudes toward their common activity of “doing philosophy.” For Wittgenstein, “the real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to” (remark 133), whereas for Derrida, “the passage beyond philosophy does not consist in turning the page of philosophy (which usually comes down to philosophizing badly), but in continuing to read philosophers *in a certain way*” (“Structure, Sign, and Play” 288). (145)

Law nevertheless argues that these “are two positions which in crucial ways meet at the extreme” (146). Law offers a reading of Wittgenstein and Derrida in which they are mapping the ways in which language is used to describe itself with reference to an inside and an outside of language, a reading which is in many ways very appealing. Especially valuable is his compilation of passages in which Wittgenstein uses the concepts of ‘inside’ and ‘outside.’ But there are some problems in the details.

Law’s most general thesis concerning this meeting is that Wittgenstein and Derrida both attempt “to *extend* the field of language by breaking down its *internal* barriers” (143). One problem is that Law’s thesis is undermined by a misinterpretation of a passage from *Of Grammatology*. Law claims that Derrida wants to extend the definition of writing to include the “wavy lines” Levi-Strauss describes the Nambikwara as drawing in *Tristes Tropiques*. Here’s the passage:

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1. This small group of Nambikwara nevertheless uses a word to designate the act of writing, at least a word that may serve that end. . . . This detail, omitted from *Tristes Tropiques*, was indicated in the thesis:

“The Nambikwara of group (a) do not know anything about design, if one excepts some geometric sketches on their calabashes. For many days, they did not know what to do with the paper and the pencils that we distributed to them. Some time later, we saw them very busily drawing wavy lines. In that they imitated the only use that they had seen us make use of our notebooks, namely writing, but without understanding its meaning or its end. They called the act of writing *iekariukedjutu*, namely: “drawing lines.”

It is quite evident that a literal translation of the words that mean “to write” in the languages of peoples with writing would also reduce that word to a rather poor gestural signification. It is as if one said that such a language has no word designating writing—and that therefore those who practice it do not know how to write—*just because* they use a word meaning “to scratch,” “to engrave,” “to scribble,” “to scrape,” “to incise,” “to trace,” “to imprint,” etc. As if “to write” in its metaphoric kernel, meant something else.¹¹

The point of this passage is not, as Law says, that Derrida thinks Lévi-Strauss should include the wavy lines drawn by the Nambikwara under the usual concept of writing. It is that Lévi-Strauss’s reasoning for excluding them is invalid. The key is the phrase “just because” which I have emphasized in the passage. One cannot exclude the wavy lines as writing *just because* the word used to describe the action “means” “drawing lines,” as the same is true for the French word for writing.

Law interprets this passage as saying that “Derrida criticizes Lévi-Strauss for refusing to count as ‘writing’ the Nambikwara tribe’s various kinds of drawing” (147). But I think that Derrida is not saying this at all. Instead, he is criticizing the translation by Lévi-Strauss of the word “*iekariukedjutu*” as “drawing lines,” since this denigrates the Nambikwara by indicating that they have no word for writing, and hence they have no writing *just because* the word means something like “to scratch.” Lévi-Strauss’s reasoning is fallacious since it would be applicable to “the languages of peoples with writing” and “would *also* reduce that word to a rather poor gestural signification,” even in the French language. I have here stressed the word “also,” since it suggests

that Derrida is saying the opposite of what Law claims, since it seems to put the Nambikwara in opposition to “people with writing.”¹²

Another way in which Law draws together Wittgenstein and Derrida is by asserting that neither of them answer the question “how is it language deceives us about its own nature?” (143). Law goes a bit further and claims that “neither philosopher’s work in itself points to, or points away from, such [historical, metaphysical, or psychological] constraints” (163). I think Law’s view that Wittgenstein’s views are compatible with psychological, sociological or historical explanations of our tendencies to be misled by language is true and very valuable. But Derrida is hostile to any psychological, sociological, or historical explanations of philosophically significant textual production. This is not a trivial point; if we could satisfactorily explain the deceptions of language through history or psychology (or sociology, etc.), then it would be possible to escape metaphysics and there would be no need to continue reading philosophers. This is why Derrida makes a point of trying to show how all such sociological, historical, and psychological explanations in turn fall within the determinations of metaphysics.

Prior Commitments: Garver and Lee’s *Derrida & Wittgenstein*

Unlike Staten, Newton Garver and Seung-Chong Lee see Derrida and Wittgenstein as in opposition (1994). But unlike Law and Truong Rootham, Garver and Lee fail to accurately delineate the metaphilosophical differences in Wittgenstein’s and Derrida’s projects. Instead, they provide ‘normalized’ interpretations of both Wittgenstein and Derrida which are then used to attempt a critique of each other.¹³ They do so, I will argue, because they wish to appropriate Wittgenstein’s and Derrida’s radical critiques for their own more traditional philosophical project.

According to Garver and Lee, “Derrida’s work shares with the later Wittgenstein a basic stance on the relation of language and philosophy” (61). This stance is explained as follows:

Derrida falls squarely within the movement that regards the role of utterances in actual discourse as the “essence” of language and meaning, and that therefore regards logic as derivative from rhetorical considerations. His penetrating consideration and ultimate rejection of the basic principles of Husserl’s philosophy of language is the historical analogue of Wittgenstein’s later

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consideration and rejection of his own earlier work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In both cases a work belonging to the first historical movement in the philosophy of language of the twentieth century is examined and found unintelligible, at least partly on its own terms; and the alternative to the rejected theory belongs to the second movement, according to which rhetoric and the context of actual communication are an essential and ineradicable feature of all linguistic meaning. (89)

The terms in which this is put, that logic is “derived” from rhetoric, are not particularly Wittgensteinian (nor Derridean). They suggest a foundational project, one which is that of Garver and Lee, but doesn’t fit with Wittgenstein’s or Derrida’s philosophical approaches.¹⁴

The desire for a philosophical foundation echoes throughout Garver and Lee’s book. They claim that Derrida’s views leave no “metaphysical foundation” or “practical foundation” (32).¹⁵ They are concerned with the “relative priority” (64) of logic and rhetoric. They ask “Can there be two independent foundations for our theory of meaning?” (64). They favor the “impetus to consider rhetoric rather than logic as the *bedrock* for language and for meaning” (86, emphasis added). They attribute to Wittgenstein a “perspective that takes rhetorical force rather than word-meaning as the *foundation* of language. (88, emphasis added) Rhetorical force is supposedly, according to Wittgenstein, “the primary linguistic paradigm” (89). “The worry is that Derrida may not have left himself any *ground* on which to stand and may be enticing us along a path to nowhere—a worry that some philosophers have (mistakenly, we think) when they read Wittgenstein” (99, emphasis added). Also attributed to Wittgenstein is the view that “since they are part of the natural history of mankind, the basic ways of talking, simple language-games, including but not limited to the various modes of predication, are the *ultimate* linguistic universal, to which other universals can be *reduced*” (168, emphasis added). They object to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche that neither “provides any up-to-date starting-point, any firm ground” (207). They claim that Wittgenstein “came to believe that forms of acting and our human form of life rather than the forms of Russell’s logic provide the *foundation* for meaning and inference” (168-9, emphasis added). Wittgenstein “continued to believe that the *foundation* of language and linguistic meaning (whatever it may be) is the *basis* of philosophy” (169, emphasis added). This foundation, they claim, is a transcendental one analogous to Kant’s

philosophy (202, 209).

This foundational interpretation of Wittgenstein is obviously inconsistent with the view that Wittgenstein wished to dissolve philosophical problems.¹⁶ They dispute the anti-philosophical interpretation:

It is true that his references to philosophy and metaphysics sometimes suggest that philosophy has no future, thus echoing the Heidegger/Derrida proclamation of the end or closure of the history of philosophy. These references, however, should be read in context. Careful reading reveals that Wittgenstein does not reject philosophy itself. His target is our inclination to theorize in philosophy (216).

Garver and Lee's interpretation is a variant of the type which finds a metaphilosophical continuity between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. As such, they return Wittgenstein to a much more traditional philosophical position, making the comparison with Derrida much less pointed. Garver and Lee reinterpret Wittgenstein in order to support their own project. I am not going to discuss the philosophical merits of this project, but I will make a few comments about their interpretation of Wittgenstein.

First, they do not themselves provide the contexts of the passages "suggestive" of the view they dispute, and don't establish that they can account for these passages by analyzing those contexts. Instead, their interpretation of the *Investigations* is guided by two passages from late writings which were not authorized by Wittgenstein by publication.¹⁷ Second, their alternative interpretation depends on a distinction between "theorizing" in philosophy—which Wittgenstein opposed—and philosophy of a foundational and even transcendental sort—which they claim Wittgenstein didn't oppose and in which on their view he was engaged. They make this distinction by relying on a certain meaning of "theorizing": the positing of unobservables (212-14).¹⁸ Their foundational and transcendental theory is thus supposedly not "theoretical" because it doesn't posit unobservables. However, the distinction between observables and unobservables is a highly problematic and contested distinction, so that Garver and Lee's interpretation puts Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical position on very shaky ground. They don't discuss any of the literature in philosophy of science on this issue.

There is one very valuable aspect of Garver and Lee's

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discussion of Wittgenstein. Like Staten, they argue that Wittgenstein's appeal to the context and circumstances of language use involves a dynamic conception of language, citing a quote from Wittgenstein's *Last Writings*: "Words have meaning only in the stream of life" (see 63, 89, 151, 184). They link this quote to a Heraclitean view (151) and oppose it to a timeless view (67). This reminder that "context" is a temporal term is very important. However, they use it to explain what they mean by "rhetoric"; they do not explore issues of temporality.

Garver and Lee use their "normalized" Wittgenstein to attack Derrida. But their critique is vitiated by fundamental misunderstandings and confusions. Probably the most fundamental is their view that Derrida rejects metaphysics (89, 127, 136, 209), that is, metaphysical uses of language. Though, Derrida responded to such a claim in a later conference by clearly pointing out that he doesn't reject metaphysics (Mulhall 2000, 403). And this has been clear from the beginning, as Derrida has always maintained that metaphysics is inescapable and that his own texts fell within metaphysics. These claims are not considered by Garver and Lee. Consideration of these texts would also have raised problems for their claims that Derrida's views are self-refuting: Derrida's views are actually self-consistently self-referential—in the way Garver and Lee demand—because his own concepts tremble, his own problems complicate themselves, his own questions question themselves.

Garver and Lee readily admit that they don't understand Derrida: "The other worrisome aspect of *Speech and Phenomena* is the uncertainty about how Derrida views logic, knowledge and philosophy" (97): "one never knows what Derrida is talking about" (192). They seem to think that this is a criticism of Derrida, not a problem for their own endeavor. When they criticize Derrida directly for his lack of clarity, they trip all over themselves:

We cannot complain just because Derrida is often obscure, for the problems are exceedingly difficult, and a demand for pedestrian prose would be misplaced. But clarity is more than just pedestrian. Faced with Derrida's unrestrained literary extravagance, we cannot help wondering if the heavy reliance on metaphor and paradox is not also misplaced (94).

Since when is "pedestrian prose" a contrast class for "obscure"? Isn't "clarity" the opposite of "obscure"? So they criticize Derrida for obscurity—that is, for lack of clarity—*immediately* after saying that they

can't criticize him for obscurity. And the two lines quoted at the beginning of this paragraph show that they nevertheless go on to so criticize him.

It is impossible to run through all of the problems in Garver and Lee's account of Derrida. Those stated so far should be enough to show that their criticisms of Derrida carry little weight. When considered with my earlier discussion of their account of Wittgenstein, their criticisms of Derrida face two additional problems. First, most are not particularly Wittgensteinian, even according to their own interpretation of Wittgenstein. Charges of self-refutation are the stock in trade of analytic philosophy; there's nothing Wittgensteinian about them. Second, some of their criticisms, such as their worries over Derrida's supposed lack of foundations, don't count as criticisms on the standard Wittgensteinian view I'm pursuing here.

Joseph Margolis (1994) and Ruth Sonderegger (1997), in their studies, also attempt to appropriate Wittgenstein and Derrida for an antecedently held position. Margolis believes that no choice between Wittgenstein and Derrida is necessary as far as their metaphilosophical positions go. Instead, he criticizes them from a third position, a theoretical (i.e., foundational) pragmatism.¹⁹ The pragmatic view of language is Margolis' own; he says that "it is what very nearly every contemporary thinker is attracted to" (1994, 173). What becomes clear is that, although Margolis claims "how remarkably vital their [Wittgenstein's and Derrida's] dispute is for the entire movement of Western theorizing (not merely of the philosophical sort)" (162). It turns out that this dispute is not vital at all, that critiques of Wittgenstein and Derrida of the philosophical tradition are merely to be appropriated by a third position, a commonplace pragmatism, which is already widely held.

Like Garver and Lee, Sonderegger interprets Wittgenstein as a foundational philosopher and does so for reasons of her antecedent philosophical project. Unlike Garver and Lee, though, she thinks his theory is a bad one. On her interpretation, Wittgenstein is trying to come up with a general theory of language, and managed to come up with one good idea. The good idea is the way language-use depends on a trained ability which cannot be theoretically explicated. She thinks Wittgenstein goes wrong because, according to her interpretation, Wittgenstein reduces all linguistic practices to the case of linguistic training, which provides a solid, unchanging foundation, extrapolated from a single paradigm case (Sonderegger 1997, 206n.13). The teacher-

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pupil is for Wittgenstein “the paradigm for language-use in general. Wittgenstein suggests that one need only to be an initiate of a language for the rest to follow by itself” (192).²⁰ To paint Wittgenstein as a traditional theory-builder, she disregards Wittgenstein’s views on the variety, openness, and mutability of language-use. Nor is mention made of Wittgenstein’s metaphilosophical approach of dissolving problems.

Sonderegger doesn’t do much better with Derrida. She appeals to Derrida’s ideas of the openness and active nature of interpretation, and that sense is ‘produced’ and not merely discovered. She thinks that Derrida’s view is basically correct but has an “extension” which “leads to an unnecessary paradox” (194). This paradox is Derrida’s claim that “the repetition goes to constitute a sign is both the condition of the possibility and the condition of the impossibility of meaning” (194). Derrida’s metaphilosophical position, as Truong Rootham and Law saw, is one which seeks out paradoxes—not unnecessary ones to be sure, but this is not one that Derrida takes to be unnecessary, and would seem to be central to deconstruction. Again, no discussion of the meaning of “deconstruction” is found in Sonderegger. As with Wittgenstein, she interprets Derrida as a traditional philosopher. So the confrontation between Wittgenstein and Derrida which Sonderegger sets up is between a Wittgenstein who is a universal, foundational theorist (of language) and a Derrida without (“unnecessary”) paradoxes.

Sonderegger is such a philosopher herself and her reading consists of taking an idea from Wittgenstein and one from Derrida to build her own theory. Sonderegger’s theory is not only methodologically traditional, its content is metaphysically traditional, and traditional in ways that are open to challenge on either Derridean or Wittgensteinian grounds. For she does not merely take the ideas noted above and put them together, she then supersedes them with what are for her the master-words of “dialogue,” “truth,” “telos,” “validity,” and “appropriate.”

We have first to produce the sense of the expression dialogically, and dialogue is a process of judging the truth of each other’s utterances. (198)

We can speak about sense or meaning only when understanding, as the terminus of the process, so to speak, has been *arrived at*. (199)

Understanding implies adjudicating and answering a question of truth; i.e., the interplay between the

interpreter's perspective and that of the speaker or the text is regulated by a relationship to truth. (201)

The interpreter's perspective must play a part here not just because it is hers, but because she assumes that it is, from the point of view of validity, the appropriate one. (201)

It should go without saying, but apparently needs to be said, that Derrida finds all of these concepts problematic, and yet Sonderegger omits any discussion of Derrida's comments on "truth," "dialogue," or the "proper." She does quote Derrida at another point in the paper on the need for rethinking teleology (195), which perhaps is what prompted the (rather confusing) footnote to the second of the above quotes in which she says that she wishes to stress the concept of process, not that of telos. What I find interesting is the way in which the concept of arrival—stressed by Sonderegger at the end of the quote—brings back the full force of the teleological, along with the conception of interpretation as a kind of exile. These are conceptions which Derrida points out as metaphysical, and Sonderegger notes in a footnote that Derrida so points out, and yet Sonderegger is still unable to avoid.

Points of Opposition

These analyses have shown that one of the factors which has vitiated much of the usefulness of these studies has been the urge of the writers to have Derrida and Wittgenstein hold the same view. Sometimes this urge reduces Wittgenstein to Derrida (Staten and Mulhall) or Derrida to Wittgenstein (Rorty and Mulligan). Another is the appropriation of both Derrida and Wittgenstein for an antecedently conceived project, such as pragmatism (Margolis), transcendental philosophy (Garver and Lee) or the theory of communicative action (Sonderegger).²¹

I think it is fair to draw the conclusion that a confrontation between Derrida and Wittgenstein has yet to take place. In order to point the way for such a comparison, I will make a number of specific suggestions for future research. The first three are my own suggestions concerning issues which have not been mentioned by the studies reviewed. Of course, comparison of Derrida and Wittgenstein might be fruitful on any number of points; I have selected those which I believe to have a special significance and where it is easiest to see that

Derrida and Wittgenstein come close to direct opposition. The last suggestion will draw a positive direction from the studies discussed.

a. *Words.* Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance" words is probably his most potent argument against essentialism. This idea applies both diachronically and synchronically—words may have different referents from earlier uses of the same words, and words may be used currently with different referents—and all of these uses may be legitimate. None need be the "essential" or "true" meaning. Hence, it need not raise any metaphysical issues when words are used in different ways as long as these new uses are related to previous or current uses. This holds for the use of words by philosophers as well. However, for Derrida the use of old terms in new ways—at least when used by philosophers to attempt to escape metaphysics, possibly in all other cases as well—raises the "question of paleonymy." (The key text here is "Outwork," Derrida's preface to the collection *Dissemination*, which deconstructs the concept of a "preface.")²² This is the sort of question which is never answered; rather, it is raised, elaborated, enacted. If Derrida's argument that these terms are irrevocably tied to their metaphysical uses can be maintained, this would raise a serious challenge to Wittgenstein's attempts to dissolve philosophical problems. However, Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance" terms would seem to pose a problem for Derrida's "question of paleonymy."

b. *Interiority.* The problem of other minds would seem to have been entirely dissolved by Wittgenstein's "private language argument," and the entire Cartesian account of subjectivity along with it. Many have thought that Derrida also leaves behind the Cartesian conception of subjectivity because of the critique he poses to that conception in his most well-known essay "Difference." But Derrida both challenges and retains this conception; he makes it "tremble" but never really leaves it behind.²³ So, contrary to what one might think, the problem of other minds is retained within Derrida's aporetics. It can be found in the essay "Typewriter Ribbon."²⁴ There Derrida argues that it can never be proven that someone has lied, since for a falsehood to be a lie, the speaker must believe their statement to be false. In every speech act, according to Derrida, one must "always ask for faith or confidence" because lying is unverifiable. "This necessity is nothing other than the solitude, the singularity, the inaccessibility of the "as for me," the impossibility of having an originary and internal intuition of the proper experience of the other ego, of the alter ego."²⁵

c. *Contrasts.* In the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein discusses the use of

a word without a contrast as a metaphysical use:

As in this example the word “solidity was used wrongly and it seemed that we had shown that nothing really was solid, just in this way, in stating our puzzles about the *general vagueness* of sense experience, and about the flux of all phenomena, we are using the words “flux” and “vagueness” wrongly, in a typically metaphysical way, namely without an antithesis; whereas in their correct and every day use vagueness is opposed to stability, inaccuracy to accuracy, and *problem* to *solution*. The very word “problem,” one might say, is misapplied when used for our philosophical troubles.²⁶

There is an interesting contrast between this passage and one of Derrida’s in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in which he discusses Levi-Strauss’ concept of the *bricoleur*. There he argues that Levi-Strauss’ concept of the engineer is a theological or mythic concept, and thus that the concept of the *bricoleur* has no contrast:

As soon as we cease to believe in such an engineer and in a discourse which breaks with the received historical discourse, and as soon as we admit that very finite discourse is bound by a certain *bricolage* and that the engineer and the scientist are also species of *bricoleurs*, then the very idea of *bricolage* is menaced and the difference in which it took on its meaning breaks down.²⁷

This comparison is worthy of exploration. It might appear that Derrida is accepting Wittgenstein’s view here, but then it is hard to see how he can resist Wittgenstein’s conclusions. However, I believe that Derrida’s view is different, in that for him meaning can “break down” but not be dissolved. What is “menaced” *trembles*. In any event, the entire question of the metaphysical use of words as lacking contrast is probably worthy of reassessment.

d. *Time*. One of the most remarkable aspects of the comparative studies is the way they emphasize issues of time in Wittgenstein’s work. Grene talks of how Wittgenstein puts language “back in the context of movement” against the “immobilizing influence of philosophy.”²⁸ Garver and Lee emphasize the dynamic nature of Wittgenstein’s view, pointing out that “context” is a temporal term. Staten places Wittgenstein with Derrida on the side of “flux” against

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the atemporal. Finally, the most pointed objection raised by Stone, purportedly from a Wittgensteinian perspective, concerns time. The passage deserves careful attention:

If we regard the use of a sign as an event which, appropriately specified, *includes* the surrounding circumstances, then we are bound to see that from the fact that a doubt about meaning is *possible*, it does not follow that anyone does, or even intelligibly could (under the circumstances) actually doubt (cf. sec. 213). Hence we should want to ask: is there really any clear sense in which doubts and misunderstandings about the meaning of the sign are, as Derrida insists, a “necessary possibility”? Whence such necessity? The necessity appears only on the basis of the assumption that we can intelligibly consider a bit of sign-involving behavior in abstraction from its surrounding circumstances and nonetheless still have *sign*-involving behavior in view. By means of the expression “a sign by itself,” we thus precisely manage to represent a doubt which is merely notionally possible as *already present*, just as if any doubt which actually (i.e., in certain circumstances) *reveals* an indeterminacy that was present in any grasp of meaning *all along*.²⁹

There are many aspects of this passage that are mishandled. First, Stone relies on concepts without considering Derrida’s discussions of these concepts. His claim depends on “regarding the use of a sign as an event,” which Derrida certainly does, without considering Derrida’s numerous discussion of the “event.”³⁰ And the event must be “appropriately specified,” but again Stone never considers Derrida’s discussion of the value of the “proper” and its use in philosophy. These are not minor points but run throughout Derrida’s texts. Second, Stone actually, no doubt accidentally, proves Derrida’s case rather than his own. He does this in two ways. First, the event, when appropriately specified, “*includes* the surrounding circumstances.” Stone’s emphasis of the word “includes” only calls attention to the phrase which seems to refer to a paradoxical topology, one in which the outside (“surrounding”) is on the inside (“includes”). This topology is one of the most famous of those delineated by Derrida.³¹ Second, the necessity that Stone is trying to undermine he says “appears only on the basis that we can intelligibly consider a bit of sign-involving behavior in abstraction from *its* surrounding circumstances.” As stated, this sort of

abstraction is not only intelligible—it happens all of the time, according to Derrida. Derrida would note that every time a sign is used in a new context, it is used in abstraction from the surrounding circumstances on the previous occasion. If Stone were to argue that he means that it must be considered not in abstraction from “its” surrounding circumstances, but from *any* surrounding circumstances, then he has an additional burden of showing that the necessity only arises thus, and not from the abstraction which follows from the removal of the sign from one context to another.

But there is an interesting point which is raised here. Stone is accusing Derrida of an abstract skepticism, primarily in the same terms in which Wittgenstein attacked Cartesian skepticism. As it stands, I am not persuaded that the charge sticks against Derrida. The interesting point comes at the very end of the passage, where Stone says that Derrida “represent[s] a doubt which is merely notionally possible as *already present*, just as if any doubt which actually (that is, in certain circumstances) *reveals* an indeterminacy that was present in any grasp of meaning *all along*.” Using these terms, the charge represents a serious challenge to deconstruction because of the accusation that it *naively* falls back within the metaphysics of presence. This charge strikes me as having a certain plausibility because of its statement in terms of temporality, but it needs to be presented without relying on concepts that Derrida has challenged, or by inadvertently proving Derrida’s points.

Given Derrida’s analysis of metaphysics as “metaphysics of presence,” as well as his writings on time, it is easy to see that time plays an important role in Derrida’s thought. This is not as obvious in the case of Wittgenstein. Issues of temporality almost never appear in the literature on Wittgenstein. The standard line, and I think correct concerning Wittgenstein’s intentions, is that philosophical problems concerning time are simple confusions which need to be dissolved like any other philosophical problem. One can see this from the passage from the *Blue Book* quoted just above where Wittgenstein uses the view that “all is flux” as a mistaken use of language—a passage that neither Staten nor Garver and Lee consider.

However, I believe that a close reading of Wittgenstein will reveal that, from the time of his “turn,” he was tempted to see his basic insights as “temporal” or “dynamic,” but that he always resisted this temptation. I suspect that he did so because to look at matters in this way would open up the field for a continuation of philosophical theorizing and argumentation about time, although I don’t wish to

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foreclose the possibility that he had very good philosophical reasons for doing so as well. Any attempt to recast Wittgenstein's insights as regarding time would have to examine his own resistance to doing so.

The four points on which I suggest Derrida and Wittgenstein are to be compared—words, interiority, contrasts, time—appear to be a heterogeneous group. However, they all point to questions of metaphysics, both in its generic and pejorative senses. They show that a comparison of Derrida and Wittgenstein must confront all of the issues that fall under the heading of “metaphysics”: claims of pervasive and persistent errors in philosophy, what these errors are, if and/or how they could be avoided. Ultimately, the confrontation between Derrida and Wittgenstein involves metaphilosophical issues of the highest importance. This is established not merely by the specific issues noted above, but by an awareness of how the different philosophical approaches of Derrida and Wittgenstein, the latter attempting to dissolve philosophical problems, the former attempting to complicate them in specific ways, challenge traditional approaches to philosophical problems. If we keep in mind the metaphilosophical issues at stake, and the fact that Derrida's and Wittgenstein's approaches are at odds with not merely the philosophical tradition but also with each other, then we can truly see, as Margolis says, “how remarkably vital their dispute is for the entire movement of Western theorizing (not merely of the philosophical sort)” (1994, 162).

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Notes

¹ Ruth Sonderegger. "A Critique of Pure Meaning: Wittgenstein and Derrida," *European Journal of Philosophy*, August 1997, 5(2): 183.

² Staten draws the analogy to deconstruction of "a proposal that parallel lines might, for certain purposes and when handled according to an appropriate technique, be able to meet" (1984, 53). The analogy raises all sorts of fascinating issues given the relations between geometrical "idealizations" and philosophical "ideality." But I'm not sure it suits Staten's point, since it places us outside geometry (with its references to purposes and technique) in a way inconsistent with Derrida's claim that we cannot get outside philosophy.

³ Although I am far from any definitive answer to this question, I tend to think that deconstruction could arise from any philosophical view. This point may not be that far from Staten's, given the very broad sense Derrida gives to "reduction," so that any use of language is engaged in "reduction." Maybe phenomenology is essential to deconstruction insofar as it thematizes reductions. But this still seems quite far from Staten's view.

⁴ See also his remark: "The deconstructive moment of Wittgenstein's writing is not the whole story, but we have heard too much of the other" (Staten 1984, 156).

⁵ Staten uses "normalization" in a double sense. Academics normalize Wittgenstein by bringing his views within the norms of traditional philosophy. Also, the traditional interpretation is one in which Wittgenstein "normalizes" philosophical language by returning it to "real life" (1984, 75).

⁶ And the word "complication," which I take as key to understanding Derrida, doesn't appear in Staten's text until near the very end of the book (1984, 155, 159).

⁷ The phrase "French Wittgenstein" is found in Richard Rorty, "Derrida and the Philosophical Tradition," *Truth and Progress, Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge 1998), pp. 327-350. Rorty is referring to his earlier essay, "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?" in *Essays on Heidegger and Others, Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1991), p119-128.

⁸ Rorty, "Derrida and the Philosophical Tradition," need a page number.

⁹ Kevin Mulligan, "Inscriptions and Speaking's Place: Derrida and Wittgenstein," *Oxford Literary Review*, 1978, 3(2): 67.

¹⁰ Truong Rootham's paper has other merits as well. She notes that Wittgenstein doesn't freeze language into current usage, but allows for change in the future. She also brings into the discussion the Freudian element of Derrida's metaphilosophy, in which the 'supplements' are seen as symptoms.

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Neither of these points is raised by any of the other texts discussed.

¹¹Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. by G. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967, 123; quoted in Law, 147; emphasis added.

¹²The point is made somewhat more complicated by Derrida's quasi-transcendental "arche-writing" and his phrase "writing in general," which may also suggest Law's conclusion. However, I take Law's claim to be that Derrida thinks that we should widen our ordinary concept of writing to include the Nambikwara's "wavy lines," and this is not the case, and is not being suggested by Derrida in the passage under discussion.

¹³I use Staten's phrase to refer to interpretations which turn Wittgenstein into a traditional philosophical theorist, but not the standard interpretation (which I follow) which treat him as a "dissolver" of problems.

¹⁴Garver and Lee include use, circumstances, and figures of speech like metaphor within the category of rhetoric, which they define as "the general study of aptness and inaptness in the use of various expressions or sorts of expressions in various sorts of circumstances" (1994, 63). The relation of truth to "aptness" is never discussed.

¹⁵This claim is based on a reductive reading of Derrida's claim that "There is nothing outside the text." Tracing the inadequacies of their reading is beyond the limits of this paper. Suffice it to say that they never examine the context of this statement, although their theory of interpretation takes "context" as central to meaning.

¹⁶The anti-philosophical interpretation breaks through in their discussion when they note that Wittgenstein believes that "there is something ultimately incoherent about the notion of a 'philosophical thesis.'" (Garver and Lee 1994, 94) "One thing we have to keep in mind is that Wittgenstein is not concerned with the presentation of a particular thesis." (126) It is never explained how their foundational Wittgenstein can accommodate these points. The closest they come is their claim that the foundation they attribute to Wittgenstein is not a traditional foundation because it isn't a standard which can be used to criticize ordinary language. (171) But this is hardly sufficient.

¹⁷They rely heavily on one from *Last Writings* cited on pages 63 and 89, and one from *On Certainty* (308) cited on page 217.

¹⁸Although there might be some resonance here with Wittgenstein's comment that "nothing is hidden" in philosophy—a comment which Garver and Lee don't cite and can be interpreted otherwise—this resonance is the only support I can see for what looks like an importation of a distinction which otherwise is not of significance to Wittgenstein and which they seem to use in an un-Wittgensteinian way. For the particular meaning of "theory" they use, they cite not Wittgenstein, not ordinary language nor general philosophical use, but one physicist.

¹⁹The foundational part is clear in Margolis' claim for "the

development of a second-order legitimative discourse.” (1994, 183)

²⁰The only citation to support this interpretation is to one of the most enigmatic of Wittgenstein’s statements: “It is what human beings say that is true and false; they agree in the language they use” (PI 241; quoted in Sonderegger 1997, 192). This is an awfully large burden for this quote to bear.

²¹While there is nothing wrong with plundering Wittgenstein and Derrida for ideas and arguments for developing one’s own views, these studies suffer from inadequate attention to metaphilosophical issues. Presenting these studies in the context of a comparison of Derrida and Wittgenstein leads to a boomerang effect: the premises of the studies are undermined by the challenges of the philosophers studied.

²²Derrida is generalizing here what he says about the word “sign” in *Speech and Phenomena* and the word “structure” in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.”

²³I think this will be found to be the result of Derrida’s refusal to leave behind Husserl’s conception of intersubjectivity. For the significance of the concept of “trembling” and the “trembling” of a concept, see my “Situating Derrida: Between Kierkegaard and Hegel” in *Philosophy Today*, Winter 2000, 44(4), p388-403.

²⁴Jacques Derrida, “Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2),” *Without Alibi* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002). p71-160.

²⁵Ibid. 111; cf. also 112.

²⁶Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965, 45-6. One may wish to consider, in light of this passage, Derrida’s use of the terms “problem” and “question.”

²⁷Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences, in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 285.

²⁸Marjorie Grene, “Life, Death, and Language: Some Thoughts on Wittgenstein and Derrida,” *Philosophy In and Out of Europe* (University of California Press, 1976), 150.

²⁹Martin Stone, “Wittgenstein and Deconstruction,” in *The New Wittgenstein*, edited by Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 106, emphasis in original.

³⁰Here we must distinguish the sign from its use, since as Derrida says, “A sign is never an event...” *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 50.

³¹Most notably in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p30-65.

Does anybody know any good journal articles that may be useful here (ones relating to Derrida and queer theory) or just have any ideas about how they relate? 10 comments. share. [â€œ] Lonelobo 12 points13 points14 points 1 year ago (1 child). Well, the obvious Derridean critiques would be that a) non-binary cannot be a stable signifier (or else it just participates in the metaphysical logic of the supplement that it purports to undercut) and that b) binary / non-binary is itself a binary opposition in need of deconstruction. permalink. embed. save. give award. [â€œ] mvc594250 17 points18 points19 points 1 year ago (1 child). I dont have a lot of useful input but I'm very interested to see this develop and to see any recommendations you may get! permalink. embed. save He gets riled when Derrida gets bad-mouthed and distorted. Which makes him a medley of the coolest daddio Derridean-doo-be-doo! 3:AM: What was it that made you become a philosopher?â€” And Wittgenstein, arguably the single most important analytic philosopher, was extremely cryptic and actively averse to argumentation, yet he largely got a pass (I catalogue his and othersâ€™ comments about this in my book).â€” I quite agree with your point â€œ if they are all just saying the same thing, then all this work would hardly be worth it. But although theyâ€™re talking about overlapping topics, and some of the same ideas do pop up in both traditions, I donâ€™t think analytic and continental philosophy developed the same trajectory nor are they just saying the same things. Starting from an Heideggerian point of view, Derrida argues that metaphysics affects the whole of philosophy from Plato onwards. Metaphysics creates dualistic oppositions and installs a hierarchy that unfortunately privileges one term of each dichotomy (presence before absence, speech before writing, and so on). The deconstructive strategy is to unmask these too-sedimented ways of thinking, and it operates on them especially through two stepsâ€”reversing dichotomies and attempting to corrupt the dichotomies themselves. The strategy also aims to show that there are undecidables, that is, somethin Derrida and Wittgenstein: Points of Opposition. Ralph E. Shain. The radicality of the challenges posed by Wittgenstein and Derrida to traditional philosophical approaches has provoked a number of comparisons of the two. There have been over a dozen such studies published, two of book length. One comes to these studies hoping for a â€œproductive confrontationâ€” between Wittgenstein and Derrida, to use Ruth Sondereggerâ€™s phrase.¹ The aim of the first two parts of this paper is to review these studies. Focusing primarily on the book-length studies, I will examine the problems they present and see wh