A spectre is haunting the intelligentsia, the spectre of what they call ‘linguistic philosophy’. Sunday newspaper reviewers and sociobiologists, theologians and dialectical materialists join in abhorring it. But as is the way with many who see spectres their reports are often incorrect and incoherent. Mr. Ernest Gellner who has joined the ranks of the philosophical ghost-seers in ‘Logical Positivism and the Spurious Fox’ is no exception. Much of what he says is indeed not worth answering. The mixture of gossip and sociology, insinuation and condescension is likely to make the uninformed reader distrust Gellner just as much as he should. Yet the appearance of any discussion of contemporary British philosophy in a journal of the Left is itself an event of importance. The socialist intellectual tradition is at a moment of crisis when there are opening new possibilities of an approach to human culture that bears neither the frozen mask of Stalinism nor the glib smile of the cultural eclectic. At such a time it is peculiarly important that we should understand the impoverishment which Marxism has suffered as a result of its isolation from the best work in philosophy. (There is an interesting similarity

---

2 Gellner 1958.
in philosophical style between Marxists and neo-Thomists, which springs from their sharing the same type of self-imposed isolation.) It would therefore be a misfortune if Gellner’s misunderstanding and consequent misrepresentations were to gain currency. What is perhaps most misleading is his use of the label ‘linguistic philosophy’ to cover what are in fact very different philosophical attitudes and doctrines. All that I want to do in this article is to bring out with a single example how Gellner misdescribes the work of Wittgenstein; for he gives the impression at least of expounding doctrines connected with that work. If I have misunderstood his intentions, I may at any rate assist others in avoiding a misunderstanding which his obscure but abusive style of writing is likely to provoke. But at the outset it ought to be emphasised that Wittgenstein’s work is complex and that its complexity is important. All that I can therefore hope to do, which is to indicate one theme of Wittgenstein’s later thought and its possible importance, must be inadequate. But before I do even this two remarks may perhaps be in place. The first is that Wittgenstein’s work stands in a far more complicated relationship to the history of philosophy than Mr. Gellner’s article suggested. Plato, St. Augustine, Schopenhauer, William James, Moritz Schlick – these and more provided problems for Wittgenstein. And the truth that does lie in recent talk about a ‘revolution in philosophy’ ought not to blind us to the extent to which Wittgenstein provided new answers to old questions: ‘What is knowledge?’ ‘What is perception?’ ‘What is understanding?’ and so on. The second is that not only, as Gellner admits, did Wittgenstein not assert that the world is totally non-mysterious but also that those who have learnt most from Wittgenstein include a number of Christians who are presumably committed by their faith to something quite other than this. Wittgenstein’s aphorism that ‘Philosophy leaves everything as it is’ says nothing of how things are.3

The theme from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* on which I want to touch is that of the non-private character of language. What I shall try to do is three-fold. I shall seek to show why the conception of a private language is important and where the roots of this conception lie. Next is shall attempt to delineate part of Wittgenstein’s attack on this notion. Finally I shall try to present one or two of Wittgenstein’s key ideas (including one mentioned by Gellner) in the light of this discussion.

---