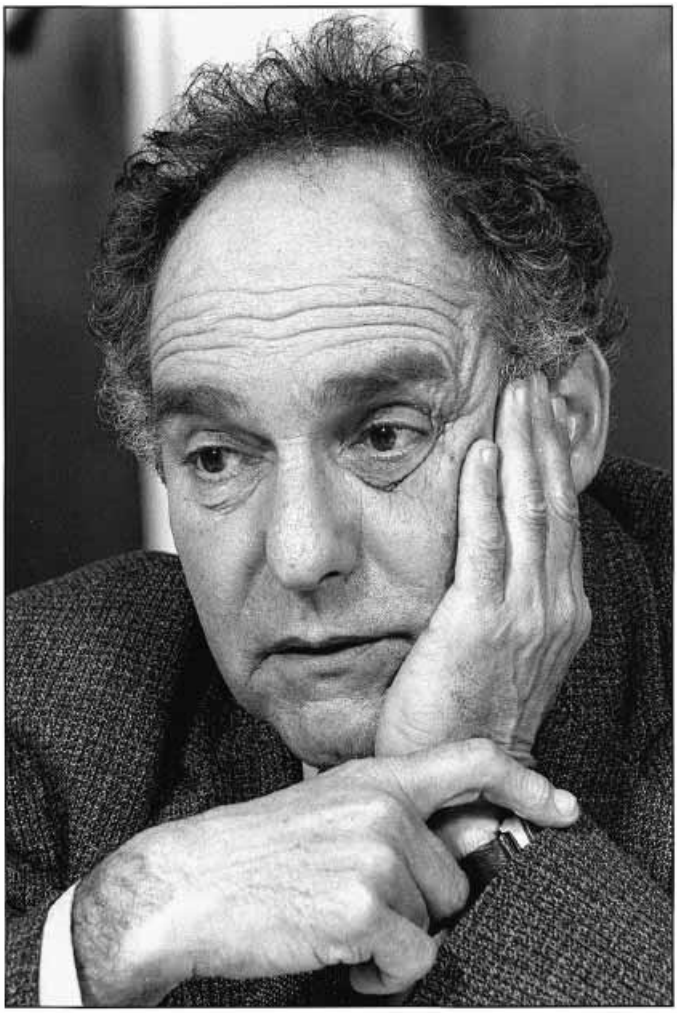
Language and Solitude

Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma

Ernest Gellner (1925–1995) has been described as 'one of the last great Central European polymath intellectuals. His last book throws new light on two of the most written-about thinkers of their time, Wittgenstein and Malinowski. Wittgenstein, arguably the most influential and the most cited philosopher of the twentieth century, is famous for having propounded two radically different philosophical positions. Malinowski was the founder of modern British social anthropology and is usually credited with being the inventor of ethnographic fieldwork, a fundamental research method throughout the social sciences. This book shows, in a highly original way, how the thought of both men, and both of Wittgenstein's two philosophies, grew from a common background of assumptions – widely shared in the Habsburg Empire of their youth – about human nature, society and language. It is also a swingeing critique of Wittgenstein, and implicitly therefore of conventional philosophy as well, for failing to be aware of these assumptions. Tying together themes which preoccupied him throughout his working life, Gellner's final word epitomises his belief that philosophy – far from 'leaving everything as it is' – is about important historical, social and personal issues.

ERNEST GELLNER was born in Paris in 1925, raised in Prague, and came to England from Czechoslovakia in 1939. He studied at Balliol College, Oxford, and taught philosophy in Edinburgh, before joining the Sociology Department of the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1949. He was Professor of Philosophy with special reference to Sociology from 1962 to 1984, when he became William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology in Cambridge. After retirement from the University of Cambridge, he joined the Central European University in Prague where he established and headed a Centre for the Study of Nationalism. He died in 1995. He was the author of many books, including *Words and Things* (1959), *Thought and Change* (1964), *Saints of the Atlas* (1969), *Muslim Society* (1981), *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), *The Psychoanalytical Movement* (1985), *Plough, Sword and Book* (1988), *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (1992), *Conditions of Liberty* (1994), and *Nationalism* (1997).



Ernest Gellner, 1925–1995

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Ernest Gellner

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Preface

My father left two unpublished book-length manuscripts when, on 5 November 1995, he died in his flat at the Central European University, Prague. One manuscript required relatively little work and was published by Weidenfeld in 1997 as *Nationalism*. This is the other.

This book is in many ways a fitting – almost autobiographical – last work. In the first place, it brings together themes that he worked on throughout his academic career, from *Words and Things*, the attack on Wittgensteinianism that made his name in 1959, through *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) and *Nationalism* (1997), to studies of the development of his adopted discipline, social anthropology, and in particular the canonical place of Bronislaw Malinowski within it (published in various articles over the years). But in the second place, the Habsburg social background to the thought of Wittgenstein and Malinowski that he describes here was also his own background, or, strictly, that of his father. The choice that faced Wittgenstein and Malinowski was also the choice that faced every member of his family. On both sides my father was descended from secularised, German-speaking Jews, as was common in Bohemia, though less so further east in Poland. His grandfather was a loyal subject of Franz Josef who had nine children. The men became lawyers, doctors, even, in one case, a theatre director. One of his aunts was an active Zionist. His father, Rudolf, went to Berlin to study history and sociology the year after Max Weber died. Later he studied in Paris and made some money by writing for German newspapers. The birth of my father meant that his parents had to have a more regular income, so his father gave up being a student and returned to Bohemia. They endured real poverty, with Rudolf selling his books so they could eat. Eventually he began a small business and also started a Czech-language law review. Rudolf had had to learn Czech as an adult, after the creation of the Czechoslovak state, but his sympathies were with it rather than with Zionism.

As the 1930s progressed, the threat from the Nazis became clear and Rudolf prepared the family's flight to England, where one of his sisters

was married to an Englishman. No one knew when or if the final catastrophe would occur, so it was only in 1939, after the Germans had invaded Czechoslovakia, that they escaped. Since adult males were not allowed to travel through Germany, my father, then thirteen, together with his younger sister and his mother, set off by train across Germany. Rudolf and a close friend, who was later to become his business partner, attempted to cross illegally into Poland. Twice they were turned back, but the third time they were successful. In Warsaw, by good fortune, they met some old contacts of Rudolf from Siberia where he had spent some years as a prisoner of war during and after the First World War, contacts now in the Communist Party. They succeeded in getting the all-important visas for Rudolf and his friend to proceed to Sweden and then on to London. In England my father's family lived first in Highgate and then moved out to St Albans. It was from St Albans County Grammar School for Boys that he won a scholarship to Balliol. He studied for one year before leaving to join the Czech Brigade and spent much of the war besieging Dunkirk. The Brigade went first to Plzen and then to Prague for victory parades. Apparently he was captured on film driving his half-track through Plzen, though he never saw the film himself. In Prague my father demobilized and attended lectures at Charles University. He was cured of his nostalgia for the city of his youth (in England he used frequently to dream about it) by the realization that the Communists were going to take over. This must have seemed likely to his family in England also, since they were worried he would be trapped there a second time. He returned to Balliol to finish his degree after a few months.

The atmosphere in the Oxford of the time is described below in sections 32 and 33. He found the local orthodoxy, which was inspired by Wittgenstein's later philosophy, complacent and trivialising. But so many people took Oxford linguistic philosophy completely seriously that, though he was always convinced that it was wrong, it was a long time before he felt able to tackle it head on. After two years teaching philosophy at Edinburgh University he moved to a lectureship teaching philosophy in the sociology department at the LSE. He published four conventional philosophy articles in 1951 in order to get tenure, but then published nothing for four years. He spent his vacations climbing or skiing in the Alps. The LSE at the time was a dynamic and stimulating place, with Popper dominating the philosophy department, Oakeshott politics, and the disciples of Malinowski in anthropology. On his own account, it was after he began to study anthropology seriously, and had decided to take a PhD in anthropology, that he found himself able to articulate his critique of Oxford linguistic philosophy. Victor Gollancz

approached him after hearing him speak on linguistic philosophy on Radio 3 and the result was *Words and Things*. When it came out in 1959 it became a *cause célèbre* because Gilbert Ryle refused to review it in *Mind*, the leading philosophy journal which had published my father's first article. Bertrand Russell, who had contributed the foreward to *Words and Things*, wrote to *The Times* and, over the next eighteen days, there followed a whole series of letters about the propriety of Ryle's action, culminating in a leader article. The description of these events by Ved Mehta, *The Fly in the Fly Bottle* (1962), infuriated my father with its facile attribution to him of things he never said.

Clearly, then, the ideas of both Wittgensteins, the 'early' Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the 'late' Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* and other posthumously published works, as well as the ideas of Malinowski, were central concerns of my father for most of his adult life. When he was invited to an Italian conference on 'levels of reality' in the early 1980s he produced a paper entitled 'Tractatus Sociologico-Philosophicus' which attempted to outline his fundamental position in terms of a commentary on seven gnomic propositions on the model of the *Tractatus* (Gellner 1987*g*, ch. 11; for references to my father's works see the special bibliographies below). Psychologically, it was the discovery of the 'school' of social anthropology created by Malinowski at the LSE that enabled him to produce his first critique of Wittgenstein in *Words and Things*. As with Wittgenstein, he never met Malinowski himself; but in both cases, he had prolonged exposure to their closest disciples.

Like both Wittgenstein and Malinowski, my father left Central Europe and had to make his way in England. Of course, he was younger when he came, and it was a generation later. Wittgenstein he always thought of as a brilliant curiosity, but in no way as great a philosopher as Karl Popper. Likewise, he makes it clear here that he believed Malinowski to have been far more original than Wittgenstein in the way he dealt with the Habsburg intellectual inheritance. He seems to have identified with Malinowski particularly in his attitude to nationalism, since he advocates, as the only humane way to deal with multi-ethnic situations of conflict, exactly Malinowski's combination of cultural freedom and decentralisation, on the one hand, with political centralisation, on the other (see section 28 below and *Nationalism*, section 16).

It is evident that in 1950s and 60s the theme of the present book – the roots of both Wittgenstein's and Malinowski's thought in the social and ideological conditions of the late Habsburg Empire – had not yet occurred to my father. He reviewed the Malinowski Festschrift edited by Raymond Firth very favourably without mentioning Wittgenstein

(Gellner 1958*h*), even though Firth, in his contribution on language, had already raised the possibility of a connection between the two (Firth 1957: 94). In the 1960s my father also briefly compared the two thinkers – very much to Malinowski's advantage – while reviewing A. R. Louch's *Explanation and Human Action* (Oxford, 1966), without considering their common Habsburg background. When *Words and Things* was reissued in 1979 the new introduction was sub-titled 'Wittgensteinianism Reconsidered in Historical Context'; its arguments prefigured much of the analysis given here, but there was as yet no mention of Malinowski or of the Habsburg Empire. It is my guess that it was at the centennial conference of Malinowski's birth, held in 1984 in Cracow, that the seeds of the present book were sown. By the time of his interview with John Davis (*Current Anthropology* 32 (1991): 69–70; Gellner 1991*a*) the argument was already clear to him (cf. Gellner 1991*d*, 1992*c*: 116–23). Furthermore, since his thought had considerable unity, it is not surprising that certain parts of this book are prefigured elsewhere: for instance, the arguments on Hume and Kant in section 12 will be familiar to readers of *Legitimation of Belief* (1975*a*) and *Reason and Culture* (1992*e*), and much of the material on Frazer and Malinowski builds on or repeats arguments made in his essay 'Zeno of Cracow' (Gellner 1987*h*) and in *Politics and Anthropology: Revolutions in the Sacred Grove* (1995*x*). The arguments about nationalism are made at greater length in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983*e*), in an essay published in G. Balakrishnan (ed.), *Mapping the Nation* (Gellner 1996*i*), and in *Nationalism* (1997). They were also tried out in numerous other places, since nationalism was the topic about which he was most often asked to speak in the 1990s (see bibliography on nationalism below).

In short, *Language and Solitude* is a synthesis of several themes that concerned my father all his adult life: the thought of Wittgenstein, the history and theory of social anthropology, the causes of nationalism, the nature of modernity, and the social roots of rationality and irrationalism.

Since this book attempts to identify the social context of ideas, it is worth remarking that my father's approach was far from determinist. Although he clearly believed that Wittgenstein's development could not be understood without taking into account the 'Habsburg dilemma' which Wittgenstein himself was not consciously aware of, the substance of my father's critique of Janik and Toulmin is that they go too far in attempting to derive the *details* of Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas from the local context. In other words, my father allowed considerable scope for the power of ideas to work themselves out independently. One can contrast the procedure of Clifford Geertz who, being concerned only with Malinowski's text, draws attention to the constant juxtaposi-

tion of 'High Romance and High Science' in Malinowski's writing (Geertz 1988: 79) without any attempt to explain either the origins or the originality of his characteristic and unique combination of romanticism and positivism.

Another 'health warning' may be in order for those who are not familiar with my father's style of writing (he was both amused and pleased to have been included in an American collection supposed to illustrate fine essay writing). One should not be misled by his frequent metaphorical usages. I am reliably informed that Carpathian villages do not actually have 'village greens'; that should not detract from the point being made by his references to worshippers of it or them.

As noted, my father had been working on and revising this book for some years. The manuscript in its latest version was scattered with notes to himself, such as 'END OF PASSAGE PROBABLY DUE FOR EXCISION', 'WHAT FOLLOWS REDUPLICATES EARLIER PASSAGES BUT SOME BITS MAY NEED TO BE RETAINED' or 'QUOTATION FROM MACH TO FOLLOW.' In other words, he had yet to work through the entire book and revise it in the light of repetitions. I have adopted a fairly conservative policy, cutting out and rearranging as little as possible, but readers should be aware that it is not in the form that he would have given it and is certainly more repetitious than it would have been had he lived. I am responsible for adding the sub-title and the division into five parts. I have made numerous small stylistic changes that I certainly would have suggested to him anyway if given the chance (he always insisted, no doubt in deference to some distant lesson at the Prague English Grammar School, that 'a number of' should be followed by a singular verb; alas I have had the last word on this). I have tried to check all quotations and I have systematized the references, adding some relevant works to the bibliography that were in his library but are not quoted or mentioned. In the case of the quotation from Mach I had to select it as well. Most importantly, I have moved and amalgamated material as follows:

1 Section 12, 'Ego and language', was composed separately and has been slotted in by me;
2 What is now section 3, 'Genesis of the individualist vision', was originally section 5, coming after 'Romanticism and the basis of nationalism';
3 The last two paragraphs of section 9 originally appeared at the end of section 5;
4 What is now section 32, 'The impact and diffusion of Wittgenstein's ideas', originally appeared immediately after section 17;
5 There was a section called 'Populism to philistinism' appearing immediately after 'The impact and diffusion . . . ' which has been

absorbed into section 33, 'The first wave of Wittgenstein's influence';
6 Sections 15 and 20 have absorbed what were originally separate following sections;
7 The final section, 'Our present condition', seems to have originally had the title 'The truth of the matter II'.

Should anyone wish to make a scholarly study of the draft as it was, they should write to me at the Department of Human Sciences, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH.

The painting that appears on the cover is by an unknown Russian artist, called Ella, who gave it to my parents in 1989. When he began writing this book my father always intended that it should be on the cover. Unfortunately all attempts to trace the artist or to discover her surname have failed.

Special thanks are due to Gay Woolven who spent many years trying valiantly to bring some order into my father's affairs and who typed and retyped versions of the manuscript over several years, digging out the final version after my father's death. John Hall, Ian Jarvie, and Chris Hann read through an earlier draft and made detailed suggestions for improvement, as did my mother, Susan Gellner, and my wife, Lola Martinez. Ian Jarvie provided the bibliographies and Steven Lukes kindly agreed to write a foreward. For all this help and moral support, I am deeply grateful.

DAVID N. GELLNER

Foreword

David Gellner is right to describe this exhilarating book as a synthesis of several themes that concerned Ernest Gellner all his adult life: 'the thought of Wittgenstein, the history and theory of social anthropology, the causes of nationalism, the nature of modernity, and the social roots of rationality and irrationalism'. Exhilarating and unclassifiable: at once a synoptic interpretation of the thought of Wittgenstein and Malinowski; a comparative assessment of their world-views – of their accounts of knowledge, language and culture; a brilliant sociological sketch of the common socio-political and intellectual background which they shared; a view of their influence upon their respective disciplines; and a passionate and polemical argument with them and some of their successors, in which Gellner once more and for the last time eloquently and succinctly expresses his own world-view. He expresses it here, with all his characteristic verve, by engaging directly with what he takes to be the egregious and wholly pernicious errors of Wittgenstein, early and late, in the light of what he sees as Malinowski's liberating but only partially developed (and partially retracted) insights into the interrelated themes that have together been central to his own life's work.

It is, moreover, a genuine effort at synthesis: a bringing together of purely philosophical theories, about the nature of reality, knowledge and language; contending accounts of what he calls 'socio-metaphysic, or philosophical anthropology'; and alternative political standpoints seen as expressing alternative responses to a common historically-given predicament. The essence of his argument can be briefly stated. These various elements are 'aligned' with one another, forming 'two poles of looking, not merely at knowledge, but at human life' and 'the tension between them is one of the deepest and most pervasive themes in modern thought'. The 'two poles' are given a variety of labels. One is the 'atomic-universalist-individualist vision', beginning with Descartes and Robinson Crusoe, typified by Hume and Kant, and reformulated by Ernst Mach and Bertrand Russell. It is variously identified with empiricism, rationalism and positivism, and with *Gesellschaft*, with economic

markets and political liberalism, and bloodless cosmopolitanism. The other is the 'communal-cultural vision', the organic counter-picture, first lived and practised unreflectively, then articulated by Herder and by countless 'romantic organicists', 'nationalist populists' and 'romantic rightists', stressing totality, system, connectedness, particularism, cultural specificity, favouring *Gemeinschaft*, roots, 'closed, cosy' communities, *Blut und Boden*. The 'alignment' of the elements within these poles and the tension between them was especially strong in the Habsburg lands, not least Poland and Austria, as the Empire reached its end, where 'the confrontation of atomists and organicists . . . meshes in with the alliances and hatreds of daily and political life'.

Wittgenstein, trapped within this polar opposition, veered from one philosophical system to another, expressing in extreme form first the one and then the other of these polar alternatives. Malinowski, by contrast, recombined elements from both – romantic and positivist, organic and liberal – thereby prefiguring and expressing a version of Gellner's own position. This is that a 'third option' is available which combines the recognition that 'shared culture can alone endow life with order and meaning' with understanding that 'the notion of a culture-transcending truth' is inseparable from cognitive (notably scientific) and economic growth, that it is central to our culture and indeed that 'the possibility of transcendence of cultural limits' constitutes 'the most important single fact about human life'.

Clearly, Gellner's argument, as presented here, relies upon his construction of the two poles. The text begins with the dramatic claim that there are 'two fundamental theories of knowledge,' standing in 'stark contrast to each other,' which are 'aligned' with 'related, and similarly contrasted, theories, of society, of man, of everything.' This 'chasm', he writes, 'cuts right across our total social landscape'. The confrontation is 'deep and general'. Yet we are very soon presented with a variety of telling examples of British thinkers whom it does not fit. In Britain, Gellner suggests, the confrontation between atomists and organicists 'cannot be tied in with, and reinforce, any political cleavages in the country.' On the other hand, it 'really came into its own within the Danubian Empire', with individualist liberals, often Jews, defending the idea of a pluralistic, tolerant, patchwork empire and nationalist intellectuals offering the alternative of 'a closed, localised culture, idiosyncratic and glorying in its idiosyncrasy, and promising emotional and aesthetic fulfilment and satisfaction to its members.' Generalising the point, he suggests that 'the opposition between individualism and communalism, between the appeal of *Gesellschaft* ("Society") and *Gemeinschaft* ("Com-

munity")' is a 'tension which pervades and torments most societies disrupted by modernisation'. In any case, it was, he claims, deeply embedded in the Central European world, from which he himself came, where it was 'closely linked to the hurly burly of daily political life and pervaded the sensibility of everyone'.

This claim suggests that there is a distinctly personal, even autobiographical aspect to the present work. Its argument proceeds, one might say, from exposition to exposure. Gellner first expounds by reporting on the apparent naturalness and self-evidence of the linkages between the components of these two great complexes of ideas and attitudes and of the tension or confrontation between them. He then exposes that naturalness and self-evidence as an illusion. The overarching dichotomy in question is a massive but historically contingent construction urgently in need of deconstruction. And he makes this argument through a multiply paradoxical interpretation of the thought of his two principal *dramatis personae*, which in turn provides a commentary upon his own intellectual choices.

Thus Wittgenstein, explicitly assuming these to be the only alternatives, first expressed 'the solitude of the transcendental ego,' by giving an account of 'what the world looks like to a solitary individual reflecting on the problem of how his mind, or language can possibly "mean", i.e. reflect the world'; and then offered a second philosophy, transplanting 'the populist idea of the authority of each distinctive culture to the problem of knowledge', concluding that 'mankind lives in cultural communities or, in his words, "forms of life," which are self-sustaining, self-legitimating, logically and normatively final'. Wittgenstein did this, Gellner argues, even though he was totally ahistorical and lacked 'any sense of the diversity of cultures, and indeed of the very existence of culture' and, moreover, was uninterested in social and political questions. In short, Gellner's Wittgenstein is a sort of unwitting transmitter of prevailing cultural assumptions, with a 'ferocious narrowness of interest', whose expression of 'the deep dilemma facing the Habsburg world' was all the more effective because 'it was never consciously thought out and never at the forefront of his attention', expressing those assumptions in successive, one-sided philosophies, the later of which retains enormous cultural influence.

Malinowski, on the other hand, was able to escape the tyranny of those assumptions, partly because they were less dominant in Cracow than in Vienna and because his life situation and temperament made him more inclined to 'doubts' and 'rational thought', but principally because he applied a biologically-based philosophy of science to cultural objects. Malinowski combined the radical empiricism he had learnt

from Ernst Mach with a penchant for ethnographic fieldwork, which in Eastern Europe had a 'culture-loving and culture-preserving' significance inspired by populism and nationalism. In consequence he was able to develop a powerful new, scientific methodology within modern social anthropology, whose founder he became, combining an 'empiricist abstention from the invocation of unobservables' with 'a both functionalist and romantic sense of the unity and interdependence of culture'. At the same time, according to Gellner, while allowing that language could be 'use-bound and context-linked', he also allowed (though subsequently mistakenly denied) that in scientific and philosophical contexts, it properly strives to be context-free. He further reflected in a fruitful and original way upon the relation between cultural and political nationalism, exhibiting a 'remarkable freedom' from the latter. He argued, in a way that foreshadows Gellner's own position, that the only hope is to 'limit the political power of nations, but permit, indeed enhance and encourage, the perpetuation of all those local cultures within which men have found their fulfilment and their freedom', thus 'depriving boundaries of some of their importance and symbolic potency'. Thus in these several but allegedly related ways the social anthropologist Malinowski reflected critically upon assumptions that the philosopher Wittgenstein merely reproduced. Gellner's own intellectual career, which began with a sociological as well as philosophical critique of Wittgensteinian philosophy, went on, among other things, to explore the philosophical contribution of Malinowskian social anthropology.

This structure of argument, moving from the construction of an overarching dichotomy to its deconstruction, has several significant virtues. It gives a satisfying unity and direction, even drama, to the present work. It provides a challenging basis from which to interpret and compare the thought of Wittgenstein and Malinowski. And it raises the highly interesting issue of just what the relations are between the extremely various theories, doctrines and political positions gathered around the two supposedly opposite polar views of knowledge.

Yet here Gellner's readers will doubtless be provoked to ask a number of pertinent questions. First, just what are they to make of his arresting claim that 'the universalist-populist confrontation pervades Habsburg culture and consequently, for those who are immersed in it, it has the power of a compulsive logical truism'? How is this to be squared with his argument (against Peter Winch's cultural holism) that our world consists of 'unstable and, above all, overlapping cultural zones' with 'conflicts or options within them' and 'multiple competing oracles'? And why would the inhabitants of the Habsburg lands be so 'immersed' in their culture

that the indicated polarity should be so inescapable and 'compulsive'? Why should that cultural zone – and, more generally, those of 'most societies disrupted by modernisation' where, on Gellner's theory, nationalism tends to flourish – be particularly inhospitable to the doubts and rational thought that would put it in question? David Gellner is right: Ernest Gellner was no social determinist in relation to ideas. Yet his argument seems here to require (at least in 'less blessed parts of the world' than Britain) a pervasive 'compulsion' that only a fortunate few can escape.

Moreover, the polar opposition in question is of course a massive reduction of complexity – a caricature of the history of ideas which, however, as a caricature, would succeed to the extent that its simplifications capture the essentials of what it simplifies. But here too several related questions arise. Max Weber once remarked that 'Individualism' embraces the utmost heterogeneity of meanings. It has been assigned innumerable origins and meanings and characterised from many different points of view, often hostile, ever since it was first identified by de Maistre in 1819 as a corrosive threat to social order and by Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America* as a new term to which a new idea has given birth, a turning away from public involvement that threatens what we now call civil society. Since then virtually every writer on the subject offers a different constellation, with a different purpose in view.

Gellner's version here is one such. The 'individualist', he writes, 'sees the polity as a contractual, functional convenience, a device of the participants in pursuit of mutual advantage' as opposed to the 'holist' who 'sees life as participation in a collectivity, which alone gives life its meaning'. Individualism is a tradition:

> The Crusoe tradition, which begins with Descartes, finds its supreme expression in Hume and Kant, and is reformulated again in the second positivism and the neo-liberalism of recent times, offers the story of how a brave and independent individual builds up his world, cognitively, economically, and so forth.

But is this really a 'tradition' or does it only look that way through a seriously distorting lens (in this case, perhaps, that used by an archetypal Central European nationalist)? Does Defoe's fable really illustrate Cartesian doubt? Are Humean empiricism and Kantian rationalism really bedfellows, and is the anti-contractualist, custom-favouring historian Hume really an arch-individualist? Are there not innumerable elementary errors involved in this agglomeration, confusing, for instance, abstraction, reductionism and the search for universal laws? Epistemology, economics and political theory have complex links, but not of this simple kind. Liberals (whether neo- or not) have differed extra-

ordinarily widely about economics and politics and can be rationalists or empiricists or positivists and much else besides. And from within this so-called tradition, there is unending disagreement and contestation about all these issues, and not least about what individualism is. And the same, of course, goes for the many versions and varieties of collectivism-communalism-communitarianism.

Of course, the first person to acknowledge this is Ernest Gellner, who writes, immediately following the passage just quoted, 'All this simply will not do either as an actual descriptive or as an explanatory account.' We 'have come to undestand our world a little better than when its nature was disputed by two parties'. But was there really such a time and place, rather than the construction or illusion of it? It is not clear why the illusion should only now be unmasked and why we needed to wait for Malinowski to see through it. If it simply will not do, then, of course, it never did. Which raises the interesting and important question of what account Gellner himself offers of how these ideas, doctrines and political positions properly fit together.

His position, well-known and often expressed, is a distinctive contribution to current debates embracing postmodernism and relativism, the so-called culture wars, post-positivist philosophy of science, and method in social and cultural anthropology. His case, as formulated here, is a defence of 'individualism' (or 'the Crusoe model') as an '*ethic of cognition*': a 'normative charter of how one particular tradition, namely our own, reconstructs and purges its own cognitive and productive worlds'. It maintains that 'all cognitive claims are subjected to scrutiny in the course of which they are broken up into their constituent parts and individuals are free to judge as individuals: there are no cognitive hierarchies or authorities'. It is thus atomistic, egalitarian and universalistic in that it is committed to the practice of criticism by reference to a 'notion of culture-transcending truth'. As he has put it elsewhere, one cognitive style, namely 'science and its application', is governed by 'certain loosely defined procedural prescriptions about how the world may be investigated': 'all ideas, data, inquirers are equal, cognitive claims have to compete and confront data on terms of equality and they are not allowed to construct circular self-confirming visions' (Gellner 1995*x*: 3, 6–7). This (broadly Popperian) account of the validation (though not the origination) of cognitive scientific claims marks out the ground that Gellner has, over the years, sought to defend against relativists, idealists, subjectivists, interpretivists, social constructionists and other exponents of 'local knowledge' – inheritors all, he believed, of the (late) Wittgensteinian error that this work, once more, aims to expose and uproot.

In what way can it be seen as carrying the debate further? In large part, it is, as I have suggested, a defence and restatement of Gellner's anti-relativist stance in respect of what he calls the new style of cognition constituted by science and technology that is central to our culture and has transformed our world. Here he argues that what he variously calls 'universalism-atomism' and 'individualism' 'probably gives us a correct answer to the question of how valid and powerful knowledge really works, and, in that sphere, deserves a kind of normative authority'. But what is the scope of that sphere? Is the understanding of our natural environment inherently unlike that of our social environment? And how and where is the distinction between natural and social to be drawn? In the last paragraphs of the book, he expresses a genuine and honest uncertainty concerning the reasons for science's limited success in the realm of social and human phenomena, and further uncertainty as to whether these limits are in principle surmountable or not. Furthermore, he writes of values as 'instilled by contingent and variable cultures'. And yet his intellectual heroes, notably Hume and Kant, and other thinkers of the Enlightenment, were universalists in respect of morality as well as knowledge. Is not the notion of culture-transcending moral principles also central to our culture, and do they not also deserve a kind of normative authority, and, if not, why not?

These are, of course, old, classical questions but they will not go away. Yet a further virtue of Ernest Gellner's last work is that it raises them once more in a new and unfailingly provocative way.

STEVEN LUKES