Introduction

This Element concerns Wittgenstein's philosophy in relation to realism and idealism. Before offering a preliminary sketch of Wittgenstein's attitude toward realism and idealism – and what I take to be distinctive about it – I want to say something about the targets of that attitude. An immediate difficulty in doing so is that neither *-ism* denotes a single, clearly demarcated position to which Wittgenstein's philosophy can be clearly or univocally related. Nietzsche notoriously wrote that "only something which has no history is capable of being defined." While we perhaps do not need to go quite that far, I think it is safe to say that both *realism* and *idealism* have very long histories and so, like many central terms in the history of philosophy, resist any kind of concise definition. Despite the risk of oversimplification, we can get a feel for what realism and idealism – and their opposition – are all about by noting characterizations offered by both G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell. These characterizations have the added benefit of being offered by figures with whom Wittgenstein had close relationships. In his 1903 paper, "The Refutation of Idealism," Moore succinctly characterizes idealism in the following terms: "Modern idealism, if it asserts any general conclusion about the world at all, asserts that it is *spiritual*" (Moore, 1959, 1). Notice that Moore's formulation casts idealism as an *ontological* thesis about *what there is* or what the world is *made of*. Despite Moore's ascribing this ontology to modern idealism in general, it does not accommodate comfortably one of its most prominent adherents, namely, Kant: in drawing the limits to reason, Kant's critical philosophy forbids general theses about what there is, as that would pertain to things-in-themselves rather than *appearances*. While also commendably terse, Russell's characterization allows for this epistemological dimension of idealism. Noting that "the word 'idealism' is used by different philosophers in somewhat different senses," Russell describes the doctrine as holding that "whatever exists, or at any rate whatever can be known to exist, must be in some sense mental" (Russell, 1959, 37).[1]

In their succinctness, these formulations from Russell and Moore neglect the myriad forms of idealism whose variety is signaled by the variety of modifiers that may be added to the term: *empirical* idealism, *transcendental* idealism, and *absolute* idealism, for example, are all very different views, as opposed to one another as to various forms of realism. So there is nothing like idealism *as such* that can be uncontroversially delineated and evaluated in relation to realism *as*

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[1] On the subsequent page, Russell more fully acknowledges Kantian idealism, albeit without mentioning Kant by name: "The grounds on which idealism is advocated are generally grounds derived from a theory of knowledge, that is to say, from a discussion of the conditions which things must satisfy in order that we may be able to know them" (38).

such. There is a further complexity when weighing in on these topics owing to another variety of modifier or qualifier that often accompanies *realism* more so than idealism. These qualifiers restrict the area of concern in some way, to a particular range of concepts or a particular kind of inquiry. There are protracted debates in philosophy on such topics as *moral* realism, *mathematical* realism, and *scientific* realism where what fuels those debates are concerns specific to the domain in question. To some philosophers, *values* do not look to be the kind of thing that populate the world in the way that squirrels and trees do; things (if they are indeed *things*) like *numbers* and *sets* look kind of odd too; and while the oddity of the first two is often measured against the "hard" reality of things like protons and electrons, opponents to scientific realism see such things' unobservability as warranting caution when it comes to believing in them. Yet a further complicating factor here is that such qualified forms of realism tend to be opposed not so much by idealism as by *anti-realism*, where there is at least a serious question of how such positions line up with idealism. If, for example, anti-realism denies the (full or objective) reality of something because it is *socially constructed*, that does not comport – or at least does not comport automatically – with more traditional forms of idealism and its emphasis on ideas, appearances, and other things spiritual.

We can perhaps sidestep some of these difficulties by primarily attending to what Wittgenstein himself says about realism and idealism to gain a sense of how he understands the positions, what is at stake in thinking about them, and what his attitude toward the two positions and their interplay ultimately is. Once all of this has been worked out, we can then take a step back and determine how these bear upon our own commitments when it comes to realism and idealism (including what those commitments ought to be). We can call this sort of approach an inside-out strategy, as we start from within Wittgenstein's writings and work our way out toward conclusions about realism and idealism. This strategy can be contrasted with an approach that proceeds in the opposite direction, starting from a consideration of the issue of realism and idealism – their respective commitments and liabilities, strengths and weaknesses – and then approaching Wittgenstein's texts with an eye toward determining the extent to which they incur those commitments or liabilities. While this sort of outside-in strategy may attend to passages where Wittgenstein explicitly mentions realism or idealism (or both – more on that momentarily), they need not figure centrally in the overall evaluation of Wittgenstein's philosophy. (This is especially evident in many of the interpretations of the later work as committed to some form of idealism.)

There are merits and shortcomings to both approaches. While the inside-out approach has the virtue of being especially sensitive and attentive to what

Wittgenstein himself says about realism and idealism, his own understanding of these ideas might be seen as rather narrow and idiosyncratic. This is especially worrisome in his handling of *idealism*, which he often lumps together with *solipsism*.[2] While this tendency is most prominent in the early period, the middle period's interest in "phenomenology" and the idea of a language that describes my "immediate experience" maintains a close connection between idealism and solipsism: to be an idealist is to be committed to the primacy of my awareness of my immediate experience (my awareness of *appearances*).[3] Given this basic commitment, it is a short step from idealism to solipsism, from *primacy* to *exclusivity*, as it is not clear how my "awareness" ever gets any further. While this is a recognizable form of idealism, it is but one variety and a fairly crude one at that. One need only look to Kant's philosophy to enlarge one's perspective on idealism, as the *Critique of Pure Reason* purports to offer a "refutation" of just this sort of idealism – what Kant refers to as *empirical idealism* – while itself developing a more sophisticated – and, Kant thinks, less problematic – form of idealism (*transcendental* rather than empirical idealism).[4] One can ask, for example, if Wittgenstein is committed to some form of transcendental idealism, as many readers have done; settling this question will not be furthered all that much by appealing to passages where Wittgenstein discusses and perhaps quite explicitly rejects idealism in its more solipsistic varieties (such rejections are fully compatible with a commitment – unwittingly or not – to a more Kantian variety of idealism).

There are likewise merits and shortcomings to a more outside-in strategy. Apart from the danger of never getting to what Wittgenstein actually says or thinks owing to the variety of positions that might be staked out across a wide array of domains, there is also the risk of distorting – or just missing – what is distinctive about Wittgenstein's philosophy. What I mean here is that the outside-in strategy encourages a desire to find in Wittgenstein's work some kind of more or less sophisticated philosophical thesis or theory – some form of realism or idealism suitably modified and qualified, for example – whose strengths and weaknesses might then be determined. Approaches of this kind often ignore – or explain away – Wittgenstein's own characterizations of what he is up to or what he is after. They do not, among other things, take seriously (or seriously enough) Wittgenstein's remarks about progress in philosophy: at the

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[2] See Ritter (2020), chapter 2 for a discussion of the relation between Wittgenstein's discussions of idealism and attributions to him of more sophisticated forms of idealism.

[3] See chapter 5 of Stern (1995) for an account of Wittgenstein's interest in – and later disenchantment with – the notion of immediate experience.

[4] See Ritter (2020) for a nuanced discussion of Kant's refutation of idealism in relation to Wittgenstein's middle and later philosophy.

close of the Preface to the *Tractatus*, he notes "how little is achieved" when the problems of philosophy are solved; such an attitude persists into the *Investigations*, as the motto from Nestroy suggests.[5] Nor do such approaches take seriously (or seriously enough) Wittgenstein's own disclaimers and disavowals when it comes to theories and theses. With that much philosophical writing – peculiar looking though it is – there has got to be a theory or two in there somewhere!

The liabilities of approaching Wittgenstein with an eye toward ascribing to him some form of realism or idealism can be made more evident by further attending to the inside-out strategy. I will do so at considerable length throughout this Element, but I'll offer an overview here. There are references to realism and idealism scattered throughout Wittgenstein's writings ranging from his wartime notebooks of 1914–16 to his writings of the "middle period" of the 1930s and into the later work all the way to his last remarks collected in *On Certainty*. An archival search[6] yields forty-nine occurrences of *Idealismus* and thirty-one for *Realismus* (searches that include variants on these core terms yield even more). Most of the *Nachlass* remarks are in the writings of the 1930s: there are numerous references in *Philosophical Remarks* and surrounding manuscripts and typescripts, and *The Big Typescript* contains an entire section entitled "Idealism." There are, however, no references to realism and idealism in the *Philosophical Investigations*;[7] we find only a reference to the *adherents* espousing such views rather than to the views themselves, in the second paragraph of § 402: "For *this* is what disputes between idealists, solipsists, and realists look like. The one party attacks the normal form of expression as if they were attacking an assertion; the others defend it, as if they were stating facts recognized by every reasonable human being" (PI, § 402).

While simple arithmetic shows that Wittgenstein does not *always* refer to realism and idealism together, as the number of references to idealism overall is significantly larger than references to realism, this singular appearance in the *Investigations* is illustrative of a recurring theme in Wittgenstein's references to realism and idealism: when he refers to them together, he does so not to choose sides, but to treat them as two sides of one problematic coin. That is,

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[5] The motto reads: "The trouble about progress is that it always looks much greater than it really is."

[6] Using http://wittfind.cis.uni-muenchen.de.

[7] This fade-out should not be construed as an abandonment of the concerns that animate Wittgenstein's more extended discussions of realism and idealism. That Wittgenstein notes in the mid-1940s that his thoughts about idealism and solipsism "hang together" with the "possibility of a 'private language'" registers the ongoing significance of his engagement with realism and idealism. See BNE, MS-124, 188[6] et189[1].

Wittgenstein is often interested in the dispute between realism and idealism not as something to be settled in favor of one side or the other, but as instructive for understanding how philosophical confusions arise and how they might ultimately be clarified.

One aim of this Element is to illustrate the pervasiveness of this kind of attitude toward realism and idealism, from Wittgenstein's earliest writings all the way to the end of his life.[8] Indeed, in a letter to Mary Elwyn in 1966, Rush Rhees recounts Wittgenstein's first meeting with Bertrand Russell (Wittgenstein at the time was still a student at Manchester Technical College; a mentor there had encouraged him to read Russell's *The Principles of Mathematics*). In response to a remark made by Russell "against idealism," Wittgenstein "replied that he did not think either realism or idealism was satisfactory: one would have to take some third position between them." Russell replied that an intermediate position "would not help," as "you would have to have an intermediate position between this new one and each of the others, and so on ad infinitum" (Rhees 2015, 50).[9] Clearly Wittgenstein's desire to avoid identifying with either realism or idealism runs deep. This kind of desire is evident throughout Wittgenstein's remarks on realism and idealism, as these representative samples (listed in chronological order) attest:

> This is the way I have travelled: Idealism singles men out from the world as unique, solipsism singles me alone out, and at last I see that I too belong with the rest of the world, and so on the one side *nothing* is left over, and on the other side, *the world*. In this way idealism leads to realism if it is strictly thought out. (NB, 85)[10]

> From the very outset "Realism," "Idealism," etc., are names which belong to metaphysics. That is, they indicate that their adherents believe they can say something specific about the essence of the world. (PR, § 55)

> Realism is always right in what it says. But idealism sees problems that are there and that realism does not see. (BNE, MS-156b, 22 v)[11]

These passages will be given due consideration in what follows, but for now I want to emphasize the way they indicate Wittgenstein's interest in the interplay between realism and idealism, but, beyond that, the different ways that interplay might be understood. The *Investigations* passage suggests that idealism and realism look to be locked in a kind of dispute, where their respective

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[8] Such inner consistency is a central theme of Bartmann (2021).

[9] I am grateful to David Devalle for bringing this passage to my attention.

[10] This passage anticipates TLP 5.64, which will be discussed at length in Section 1.

[11] Ritter (2020) notes the importance of this passage. I am also grateful to Alois Pichler, whose correspondence prompted me to think harder about this particular remark.

adherents are entering opposing claims. The passage further suggests that the dispute is only *apparent* – indicated by Wittgenstein's "as if" – such that there are not really opposing *theses* at all. The passage from *Philosophical Remarks* likewise suggests that realism and idealism both succumb to a kind of illusion. Wittgenstein's labeling realism and idealism as "names which belong to meta-physics" is hardly a ringing endorsement – indeed, quite the opposite – and the tone of the passage conveys an attitude of skepticism toward what "adherents" to such views "believe they can say," namely "something specific about the essence of the world." Just where and how such beliefs misfire will need to be explored, but for now, I note only that the passage from the *Remarks*, like the passage from the *Investigations*, displays a kind of neither-nor attitude toward realism and idealism, where each falls prey to an illusion whose form is common to both sides.

The early remark from the *Notebooks* and the manuscript remark from the 1930s work differently, in that neither of them offers a flatly neither-nor outlook. There is in each of them a kind of endorsement of realism: realism is a kind of "final destination" in the early remark and Wittgenstein declares the realist to be "always right" in the manuscript remark.[12] Neither of the passages, however, offers a simple endorsement of realism and in ways that I think are related to one another, despite the distance between the *Notebooks* remark and the manuscript remark from the 1930s. A lot hangs here on just what kind of "problems" idealism sees that the realist fails to notice, but these problems are described as really being there (they are not merely apparent in the manner of logical positivism's pseudo-problems). This suggests that the idealist is on to something that a simple endorsement of realism obscures or covers over. The idea that the idealist is on to something is likewise indicated in the passage from Wittgenstein's wartime notebooks, which anticipates his talk in the *Tractatus* of solipsism coinciding with "pure realism" (TLP 5.64). Whatever Wittgenstein ultimately means here – more attention will be given to these ideas shortly – I think we can safely say that there is something to be gained in traveling, as Wittgenstein describes himself in the notebook passage, from idealism to solipsism to realism (the suggestion of a journey is retained in the *Tractatus'* talk of *following out* the implications of solipsism), where the "journey" is not to be understood solely as a passage from incorrect views to the correct one, such

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[12] To these we can add Wittgenstein's remark: "Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing" (RFM VI, § 23). This remark is central to Cora Diamond's reading of Wittgenstein as exemplifying a "realistic spirit." See the essays contained in Diamond (1991), especially "Realism and the Realistic Spirit." See also chapter 7 of Cockburn (2021) for extended reflection on realism and idealism starting from this remark. The general direction of Cockburn's thinking seems to me to be consonant with the interpretation of Wittgenstein pursued in this Element.

that one would be better off just starting at the journey's end. Rather, something is learned – and retained – by tracing the path from one to another: we learn something in seeing – and seeing *how* – solipsism and realism "coincide." The journey brings into view the kinds of problems the later manuscript passage mentions that realism by itself leaves obscured. There is thus across these remarks a sense of idealism as involving a kind of insight that needs to be worried over – and preserved – despite realism's basic correctness. Rather than a neither-nor dismissal of realism and idealism, we see instead a kind of both-and attitude that accords to each side at least some merit.

Wittgenstein's ambivalence about realism and idealism – his oscillation between neither-nor and both-and attitudes – accords with his reluctance to offer – or endorse – any particular philosophical thesis. His ambivalence further accords with the way Wittgenstein is working at a more basic, but for that reason also more elusive, level, where "realism" and "idealism," as well as "realism about . . ." and "anti-realism about . . .," begin to get a foothold in our thinking. In his later philosophy especially, Wittgenstein characterizes his activity as directed not so much to worked-out philosophical views (he rarely "names names" or considers other people's work in a sustained way) as much as to what he calls *pictures*. Saying just what Wittgenstein means by a picture (which is not to be confused with his interest in picturing in his early philosophy) is by no means easy, but we can think of it as involving largely unnoticed assumptions, presuppositions, and commitments that precede and inform explicit philosophical inquiry.[13] Such explicit philosophical inquiry carries on its activities – constructing arguments, refining positions, shuttling between point and counterpoint – in ways that might *feel* substantive and yet be liable to implosion were only those largely unnoticed assumptions, presuppositions, and commitments brought into view and interrogated more directly. Wittgenstein's philosophy – especially the later philosophy centered on the *Philosophical Investigations* – is taken up with the latter kind of interrogation, which is part of why his texts look so puzzling – and are often so annoying – to so many trained philosophers.

To get a feel for the kind of picture in play here, consider a very traditional formulation of the notion of *truth* – and, by extension, the notion of *knowledge* – which can be found in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas: *Adaequatio rei et intellectus*, the "adequation" of things and intellect. This formulation recurs throughout later philosophy, for example in Kant and Heidegger. The formula presents us with a kind of fundamental division, between what is referred to here just as "things" and the "intellect." The two are depicted as separate from one

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[13] The idea that Wittgenstein is operating on a proto-philosophical level is central to Goldfarb (1983).