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## Healing the Rift: How G. H. von Wright Made Philosophy Relevant to His Life

Bernt Österman

In the introductory “Intellectual Autobiography” of the Georg Henrik von Wright volume of the *Library of Living Philosophers* series, von Wright mentions the discrepancy he always felt between his narrow logical-analytical professional work and a drive to make philosophy relevant to his life, calling it a *rift in his philosophical personality*. This article examines the nature of the rift and the various stages the problem went through during von Wright’s career. It is argued that the initial impression that his books *The Varieties of Goodness* and *Explanation and Understanding* had contributed to healing the rift, was subdued by a gradual shift in existential focus from individualistic ethics towards a critical concern for destructive ways of thinking inherent in the Western culture, connected with von Wright’s “political awakening” at the end of the 1960s. The most urgent questions of our times called for novel, non-analytical, ways of doing philosophy, employed in von Wright’s later works on science and reason, and the myth of progress. Eventually von Wright’s earlier methodological concerns were also alleviated by his belief that logical-analytical philosophy was inherently unsuitable for exposing the cultural structures it was very much a part of.

# Healing the Rift: How G. H. von Wright Made Philosophy Relevant to His Life

Bernt Österman

## 1. Introduction: “A Perceptive Reader Will See What I Mean”

Georg Henrik von Wright (1916–2003) gained international fame for his work within the logical-analytical tradition. Specifically, he was appreciated for his seminal work in the field of philosophical logic. In his homeland Finland and the other Nordic Countries, he was also widely known as a writer of cultural essays in his native language Swedish, many of which were included in the *Tanke och förkunnelse* collection, which was published in 1955.<sup>1</sup> The subjects of these essays ranged from the great Russian writers Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy to visionary philosophers of history such as Spengler and Toynbee. Starting from the late 1960s, von Wright also came to be recognized as a “participating philosopher” in the Nordic Countries, who took a stance on current political and social issues such as the Vietnam war, the repression of intellectuals in Yugoslavia and the use of nuclear power. In the 1980s and 1990s, his essay writing also shifted from his earlier reflections on cultural issues to delivering contributions to the critical examination of his times, focusing on the perils of the dominance of scientific rationality and the unwarranted belief in progress inherent in Western culture. His

<sup>1</sup>In his list of publications, von Wright has translated the title to “Thought and Prophecy” (von Wright, Vilkkonen and Kilpinen 2005). The literal translation, however, is “Thought and Preaching”.

principal works in this area were *Vetenskapen och förnuftet* (*Science and Rationality*, 1986) and *Myten om framsteget* (*The Myth of Progress*, 1993e).<sup>2</sup>

It may have crossed the minds of his contemporaries that the professional philosopher von Wright, who took an interest in topics like induction, deontic logic and the logic of preference, seemed to be a quite different person from the essayist von Wright, who focused on cultural and existential matters. Von Wright was certainly aware of the divide in himself, but clearly, he was also bothered by it. As we shall see, however, the problem underwent some modifications over the years. His first reflections on his divided philosophical personality are to be found in “Intellectual Autobiography”, which was published in 1989 as an introduction to the volume *The Philosophy of Georg Henrik von Wright* in the honourable *Library of Living Philosophers* series. These reflections were divided into two parts. The first part belonged to the bulk of the text, which had been completed in 1973.<sup>3</sup> Following a short description of his “essay-writing activities” up to the early 1970s, von Wright went on to explain that he no longer felt the need to engage in these as strongly as before—the reason being that the “rift in his philosophical personality” had begun to heal due to some works he had recently published: *The Varieties of Goodness* (1963) and *Explanation and Understanding* (1971):

<sup>2</sup>The best source in English for the essay writing side of von Wright is the compilation *The Tree of Knowledge* (1993g). In this work, for instance, there is a (somewhat shorter) English version of von Wright’s essay on the myth of progress in his 1993 book *Myten om framsteget* (von Wright 1993e). The article “Images of Science and Forms of Rationality” (von Wright 1993b), based on a keynote address from 1985, also gives a basic idea of the thoughts that were developed further in *Vetenskapen och förnuftet* (von Wright 1986).

<sup>3</sup>The text that was published in 1989 is basically identical to the biographical text dated 1973 that von Wright circulated among friends in the 1970s, except for a short postscript at the end of the former. Some copies of the early draft have been preserved at the von Wright and Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Helsinki (WWA).

I think that one motive behind my essay-writing activities was a feeling of the discrepancy between the narrowly restricted relevance and scope of my professional work and the drive which I always felt to make philosophy relevant to my life and my understanding of the world. Perhaps *one* reason why I gradually abandoned these activities was that this rift in my philosophical personality—though still here to this day—has begun to heal. A perceptive reader of *The Varieties of Goodness* and *Explanation and Understanding* will, I think, see what I mean. (von Wright 1989, 18)

However, the optimism of this passage was replaced by a much more sombre mood in the short “Postscript 1980” published at the end of the article. For here von Wright is not only stating that he still feels the rift, but he even says that he is *tormented* by this split in himself. The change of mood raises the question of what had happened during the years from 1973 to 1980 in relation to the rift in his philosophical personality.

The aim of my article is to clarify the nature of the rift in von Wright’s philosophical personality and to examine the various developments it underwent. As such, the problem provides an important perspective on the career of a remarkable Nordic philosopher, which to my knowledge, has never been thoroughly examined.<sup>4</sup> However, it also has a wider interest through its relationship with the general question of what modern philosophy (specifically, its analytical forms) can contribute to the tackling of existential concerns. I will start with an examination in Sec-

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<sup>4</sup>The “two sides” in von Wright’s production have been noted by Frederick Stoutland. However, it is not easy to find any grounds for Stoutland’s claim that “they were never . . . separated in his own mind or life” (Stoutland 2009a, 3). Thomas Wallgren has written about the subject in an article in which he also pays attention to the passage I have quoted from p. 18 in “Intellectual Autobiography” (Wallgren 2003, 541), albeit omitting the final hint about what the perceptive reader might find. His main suggestion seems to be that there was not actually a rift, since “Finnish analytical philosophy *is* critical theory” (2003, 538). This may be interesting but does not seem very helpful in reaching an understanding of what place the rift occupied in von Wright’s thinking and philosophical development. In my view, Wallgren also puts too much weight on the connection between critical theory and a “philosophy relevant to life”.

tion 2 of the nature of the rift von Wright experienced. This is followed in Sections 3 and 4 by a discussion of the sense in which von Wright could have seen the two analytical works mentioned in the quoted passage as contributions to a healing of the rift—adopting the perspective of a “perceptive reader”, as it were. In Section 5, I will turn to the question of why the rift was reopened in the late 1970s, arguing that it was a consequence of a shift in existential focus which eventually prompted von Wright to look for new philosophical methods. Section 6 deals with his solution, the “time-diagnostic” method he used in his critique of the dominance of technical rationality in Western culture *Vetenskapen och Förnuftet* (1986), which was widely read in the Nordic countries. From this I will move to an examination of von Wright’s final statements on the rift during the last ten years of his life. I will argue that although the problem of the divide is now framed in a somewhat different way, it is still possible to derive some implications for the original, methodologically oriented, question of the rift—also making it possible to see how the tension is alleviated. In the concluding remarks I will also hint at the possible contribution to the healing of the rift in which his later analytical work does play a part, which von Wright seems to have overlooked.

## 2. The Rift and von Wright’s Two Worlds

In the quoted passage from “Intellectual Autobiography” von Wright describes the divide he is experiencing as “a rift in his philosophical personality”. Later, however, he would prefer to speak about “the two sides of his intellectual life” (“de två sidorna av mitt intellektuella liv”), or the “two separate grooves” in which it had developed (von Wright 1993c, 1; 2001, 111).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Von Wright actually talks about “two separate *grooves*”, not “*grooves*”. However, this appears to be a spelling mistake. This has also been assumed in the German edition of the source, where “two separate grooves” has been translated as “zwei getrennten Gleisen” (von Wright 1995, 7).

Occasionally he also referred to his “separate worlds” (“skilda världar”) (von Wright 2001, 111). On the face of it, there may not seem to be much difference between von Wright’s various ways of characterizing his division. After all, the main ingredients always remain the same. He was referring to a separation between his “narrow professional philosophy” and the attraction he felt towards a philosophy that deals with *existential* problems. Yet, we should pay attention to the expressions he used. It is noteworthy that the term “rift” is value-laden, where talk about separate “grooves”, “sides” or “worlds” is not. Thus, there is no immediate sense of a *problem* attached to there being different sides to a person’s intellectual life, or the recognition that these sides represent separate worlds. And naturally, it may not be a bad thing that one’s intellectual life has developed in two separate grooves. However, by his early characterization of the divide as a *rift* von Wright, unavoidably, also indicates that the division troubles him—as a rift that should be *healed*. This should be compared with how he would later phrase the problem more as a wonder about the *relation* between his two intellectual sides, or as he writes in his final statement on the matter in his autobiography from 2001:

For a long time, it was a problem for me how the two sides of my intellectual life, logic and the existential complex of problems, were related to one another. Did they represent two entirely different worlds or was there an internal connection between them?

(von Wright 2001, 111)<sup>6</sup>

Of course, what is striking is how the sense of a (painful) internal conflict that so clearly was visible, specifically in “Intellectual Autobiography” has been replaced by what appears to be a much calmer reflection about the relationship between different intellectual sides. However, I will postpone the question of these

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<sup>6</sup>Translation by the author. The original text in Swedish reads: “Det var länge ett problem för mig hur de två sidorna av mitt intellektuella liv, logiken och den existentiella problematiken, förhöll sig till varandra. Företrädde de två helt skilda världar eller fanns det en inre förbindelse mellan dem?”

later developments to the final section of my article and start by focusing on what I believe was von Wright’s original problem. As we have seen, in his initial statement on the rift, von Wright speaks about “the discrepancy between the narrowly restricted relevance and scope of my professional work and the drive which I always felt to make philosophy relevant to my life and my understanding of the world” (von Wright 1989, 18). We may want to ask why von Wright did not simply widen the scope of his professional work, in order to be able to address his existential issues. In fact, this was precisely what he thought he was on his way to doing in *The Varieties of Goodness* and *Explanation and Understanding*. However, we should not overlook the *difficulty* that was involved.

Von Wright’s identity as a professional philosopher was formed under the influence of his early teacher Eino Kaila, who planted in him a “lasting deep respect for the type of rational thought which had found its fullest expression in mathematics and physics” (von Wright 1993c, 1), inspired by the Vienna Circle. It was, precisely this “spirit of exact rationality” that the revived study of logic in the early 20th century promised to bring to philosophy. According to himself, von Wright never really abandoned his preference for exact methods in philosophy. Thus, as late as in 1993, he wrote:

These early experiences set the tune for my later professional work as a philosopher. In the course of time my views have broadened and often changed, but their development never took the form of a drastic break with my own past. The labels “philosophical logic” and “analytical philosophy” seem to me to fit my contributions to the subject well. . . . (von Wright 1993c, 1)

The connection with the Vienna Circle also makes it tempting to relate von Wright’s problem of the rift to the anti-metaphysics of logical positivism. It seems right to say that von Wright sided with logical positivism in rejecting objective ethical truth and religion as answers to existential questions, although his grounds

may have been more embedded in his worldview than in considerations relating to meaning (see, for instance, Carnap 1931). What he could not dismiss was the *urges* to address questions relating to life by intellectual means.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the inheritance of the Vienna Circle appeared as a *methodological* difficulty connected with his preference for a logical-analytical approach to philosophy. It should, however, also be noted that von Wright, initially at least, did not seem to think that there was any other scholarly method of philosophy that would be existentially relevant, either. For instance, he was not impressed by philosophical movements such as existentialism—“... it is justified to ask whether philosophy is ... the right medium for posing and treating these [existential] questions. For my own part, I do not believe so”, he wrote in an article from 1955.<sup>8</sup> In this context, however, von Wright also revealed his inclination to say that the *right* way to address existential issues was through *artistic means*.<sup>9</sup> However, as von Wright’s preoccupation with the rift shows, this inclination was not strong enough to calm his philosophical aspirations to address issues relevant to his life.

In any case, von Wright’s methodological preferences make it easy to understand why he so persistently wanted to stress that the outcome of his own “essay-writing activities” were simply to be seen as *commentaries* to the writings of others, or as he explains it in “Intellectual Autobiography”: “I used to write

<sup>7</sup>A possible influence on von Wright’s position could be Wilhelm Jerusalem’s *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, one of the first philosophical works von Wright ever read (von Wright 2001, 32). Jerusalem saw the construction of a worldview as the basic purpose of philosophy, but also stressed that its methods should be “scientific” (Jerusalem 1913, 1, 11).

<sup>8</sup>Author’s translation from Swedish. The original reads: “man har rätt att spörja, om filosofien är ... det rätta mediet att ställa och behandla dessa frågor i. För egen del tror jag det inte” (von Wright 1955a, 125).

<sup>9</sup>See von Wright (1955a), where he, among other things, praises the expression existential ideas have found in the *literary* works of Sartre, and von Wright (1955b, 71–72), where he reveals his inclination to count Dostoyevsky as a philosopher.

essays in which I tried to clarify my own impressions from reading the author concerned and to explain their relevance, as I saw it, to a reading public with roughly the same cultural and educational background as my own” (1989, 17–18). These essays did not tally with his ideals of professional philosophy, and he certainly did not feel that they were completely adequate by the standards of other branches of the humanities, such as the theory of literature.<sup>10</sup> However, this still does not explain why he felt that it was so *important* to dwell on the writings of Spengler, Toynbee, Jaeger or Tolstoy. Given his strong inclination towards “exact rationality”, why would he accept *their* various, non-analytical, approaches as being adequate? The fact is, that he really didn’t. Thus, he remarks about Spengler that many of his views on epistemological and metaphysical questions are “embarrassingly dilettantish” (von Wright 1955b, 124). And in the case of Jaeger he warns against distorting history by the use of “schematizations” (1955b, 16). These inconsistencies, however, only serve to underline the type of divide von Wright experienced in his philosophical mind: the fascination he could feel for the writings of a thinker did not necessarily always agree with his own critical self.

The pain von Wright experienced in connection with his philosophical divide, I believe, stems from two sources, closely related to the idea of “different selves” in his philosophical personality. One side of it was the inadequacy of not being able to properly address issues he felt were important, and somehow also as belonging to his vocation as a professional philosopher. Quite another source of discomfort was the concern he felt for not being able to observe the scholarly standards he set for himself in the

<sup>10</sup>Von Wright also called his essays writings “of an essayistic nature without either scholarly or otherwise academic pretensions” (von Wright 1993c, 2). See also Stoutland (2009a, 3) for a comment on this passage, where Stoutland, to my view not entirely rightly, seems to think that von Wright still aspired to meet high standards of excellence with his essays, although he did not write them in the capacity of a professional philosopher.

essays he wrote as an outlet for his existential urges.<sup>11</sup> We may now also see what a healing of the rift would require, but also the circumstances under which the problem might get worse. Starting with the question of the healing, the obvious solution for von Wright would seem to be to find a logical-analytical way of working with existential problems. This is also the way von Wright tried to deal with the problem in the two works mentioned in the first section, in the passage quoted from “Intellectual Autobiography”, *The Varieties of Goodness and Explanation and Understanding*. In the next two sections I will turn to the question of what “a perceptive reader”, as he called it, was supposed to see. But there is also another possibility: to loosen the demands on “exact rationality” and turn towards other methodological options. This, I will argue, formed the content of von Wright’s eventual solution to the problem, although it may not have been a deliberate strategy.

As we have seen, the von Wright who published *Tanke och förkunnelse* was still a thinker who concerned himself with existential issues out of a *private* interest. He simply wanted to share his reflections with the readers, and in line with this, he also dedicated the book to his friends. However, all changed towards the end of the 1960s, when von Wright entered his political phase, as a philosopher who tried to make a difference. As we shall see in Section 5, these were also circumstances in which the problem of the rift eventually got worse. Basically, what had been private was now gradually replaced by social and cultural concerns. To this should be added von Wright’s growing importance as a public figure especially in Finland and in Sweden after the 1960s. Consequently, the problems he was tackling were more urgent than before. Von Wright’s public role and responsibility must also have augmented his methodological self-criticism. Clearly, the questions he was turning to towards the end of the 1970s also took him further away from his philosophical home ground.

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<sup>11</sup>In this sense, von Wright is different from Bertrand Russell, who saw his social writings as completely separate from his work as a philosopher, see Österman (2017, 212–14).

The shift towards social issues also brings to the fore the question of the extent to which the divide he was referring to even remained *the same*. Over the years, he certainly used various descriptions of his interests relating to the “other world”. Thus, in the 1973 part of “Intellectual Autobiography”, he spoke about “the drive . . . to make philosophy relevant to my life and my understanding of the world”. Later, however, he would talk about “a craving for a more ‘visionary’ grasp of the totality of human existence”, occasionally also about “a craving for . . . a *Weltanschauung* and for the understanding of ‘the meaning of life’” (von Wright 1989, 54; 1993c, 2). Again, in his final statement from 2001 he uses the Swedish expression “den existentiella problematiken”, which could be translated as “the existential complex of problems” (von Wright 2001, 111). All of these characterizations are broad, but the last one seems to be even more inclusive than the rest. Thus, we should perhaps not look for dramatic changes in the nature of the rift during the years, the counterpart of von Wright’s professional side is simply what he saw, and supposedly also what we should see, as questions belonging to being human: *the existential complex of problems*. In this article *existential* is the description I have mainly used.

Still, it makes sense to say that *shifts of focus* may take place among a person’s existential questions during a lifetime. In von Wright’s case it seems obvious that there is already such a difference in focus between the two works mentioned in the passage from “Intellectual Autobiography” where he introduces the rift, *The Varieties of Goodness and Explanation and Understanding*. Whereas the former, mirroring his interest in Werner Jaeger and his *Paidea*, is concerned with ethics and personal moral growth, the latter may be viewed as a step towards a critique of the times.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Von Wright has provided a description of his development as a humanist through four stages, *aesthetic humanism*, *ethical humanism*, *rationalist humanism* and *social humanism*, which is of some interest for the understanding of the shift of existential focus. At least roughly, *The Varieties of Goodness* represents

### 3. *The Varieties of Goodness as Work On Oneself*

*The Varieties of Goodness* undeniably has a special position among the works of von Wright. “Of all my scholarly works it is the most personal and—if I may say so myself—the best argued”, he writes in “Intellectual Autobiography” (von Wright 1989, 34). Almost 30 years later he still saw it as the best of his books (von Wright 2001, 202). It seems obvious that there is a connection between the value he ascribed to the work and his judgement that it represents a professional work that also had an existential relevance for himself. In fact, *The Varieties* would seem to be the work by von Wright in which the fusion between his existential demands and his methodological preferences was most successful. Consequently, the later reactualisation of the rift was not caused by a short-coming of *The Varieties* as such but followed from the shift in existential focus from the ethics of the individual to social questions.

The main concern of *The Varieties* was to address the bewilderment of *not knowing how to apply certain words in a moral context*. What von Wright had in mind was the use of the word “good” when we speak of “a good action” or “a good intention”, but he certainly also wanted to include other words used in a specific moral sense, such as “virtue”. This puzzlement concerning the use of words, which often seem quite clear when they are used in a non-moral context, challenges us “to reflect on the grounds” of their usage (von Wright 1963, 4). According to von Wright, such a reflexion “on the grounds for calling things by words” may be seen as a type of conceptual investigation concerning notions that are “in search of a meaning” or “crave for a definition” (1963, 5; 18).

From the outset, it is clear that von Wright was not moving in the direction of a typical metaethical investigation of 20th century ethics, which purports to separate the conceptual from

the second stage, whereas *Explanation and Understanding* represents the fourth (von Wright 1989, 18–21).

the normative. On the contrary, he was trying to *overcome* the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics:

I have wanted to say that there is also a philosophical pursuit deserving the name “ethics”, which shares with a common conception of “meta-ethics” the feature of being a *conceptual investigation* and with a common conception of “normative ethics” the feature of aiming at *directing our lives*. (von Wright 1963, 6)

The idea is, roughly, that the philosopher “moulds” the meaning of the concepts by determining their logical place within a field of concepts (1963, 5–6). In the special case of *moral goodness* this means that the philosopher specifies a meaning of the notion in a framework provided by non-moral notions of good, or what von Wright calls “the varieties of goodness” (1963, 18, 119). In this sense, *The Varieties of Goodness*, with its extensive discussion of non-moral forms of goodness, may be seen as “prolegomena to ethics” (1963, 2). Von Wright’s investigation terminates in a definition of the morally good in terms of the form of goodness he calls *the beneficial*. The idea is basically that whether an action or an intention is good or bad depends on how it affects the good of some beings (does good to or does bad to them).<sup>13</sup>

The method of *The Varieties* certainly raises some philosophical questions. For our purposes, however, it remains to be explained how it affects healing the rift. I believe that the key to the answer is to be found in the ethical content of the investigation. However, perhaps this is not immediately obvious. It is important to see that the method of *The Varieties* involves two *different* forms of conceptual investigation, relating to the distinction between non-moral uses of “good” (the *varieties*) and the “secondary” moral use.<sup>14</sup> The former case is simply taken as an investigation into uses, and as such, it also preserves the “detachment” ordinarily associated with metaethical investigations. But the latter

<sup>13</sup>For von Wright’s explication(s) of the morally good see von Wright (1963, 121, 128).

<sup>14</sup>The two forms of conceptual investigations von Wright uses in *The Varieties of Goodness* have recently been discussed in an article by Lassi Jakola (2014).

involves a reflection on *grounds* for the usage. It is precisely this “reflection on grounds”, in cases where the usage of a term is not fixed, that gives the investigation its “existential turn”. That von Wright was aware of this is specifically obvious from his later comments on *The Varieties*, such as when in “Intellectual Autobiography” he explained that “by shaping our moral notions, i.e., by explicating our conceptual intuitions in moral matters, we shape the way in which we react to the conduct of our fellow humans” (von Wright 1989, 51). The dimension of an investigation involving a *work on oneself*<sup>15</sup> is even more explicit in a much later interview for a German journal, in which von Wright describes the nature of his work on *The Varieties* as follows:

... it became more and more clear to me, that in reflecting on these matters we also take a stance on how we should understand ourselves and our own moral judgements. And this we cannot do *without growing or, at least, changing ourselves*.  
(von Wright 1997, 270; emphasis added)<sup>16</sup>

The stress von Wright puts on the idea of *The Varieties* as a work on *himself*, raises the question of how his investigation relates to *other* people. His own view was that his book mainly should be seen as an *invitation* to readers to reflect on their own moral standards.<sup>17</sup> It may be of some interest to note that what von

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<sup>15</sup>That von Wright realized the connection between the method of *The Varieties* and Wittgenstein’s famous dictum that philosophy (like architecture) is working on oneself (Wittgenstein 1980, 16e), is shown by the fact that he used, precisely, the relevant passage from *Culture and Value* as a motto for his article “En filosof ser på filosofien”, in which he, among other things, discussed the nature of the conceptual work he did in *The Varieties* (von Wright 1978a, 187). The article is basically a Swedish version of Section III of “Intellectual Autobiography”. However, the mottos used in the two texts are not the same (compare von Wright 1989, 42).

<sup>16</sup>Author’s translation of the original German: “es wurde mir immer klarer, daß man in Nachdenken über diese Dinge auch zu dem Stellung nimmt, wie man sich selbst verstehen soll und seine eigenen moralischen Urteile. Und man kann es nicht tun, ohne daran zu wachsen oder wenigstens sich zu verändern.”

<sup>17</sup>“[E]thics cannot assume moral authority over men. It can only help men to

Wright writes about the value of *The Varieties* for himself and for others, bears a strong resemblance to the “excuse” he once had offered for the publishing of *Tanke och förkunnelse* in the introduction to the book. In the latter case, we also find a self-regarding aspect: his desire to clarify his *own* thoughts on the works he was writing about, and an other-regarding aspect in the modest form of a wish to interest others in the topics of the book (von Wright 1955b, 7).

#### 4. *Explanation and Understanding as an Analytical Account of Political Activism*

*Explanation and Understanding* (published in 1971) is the second of the works mentioned by von Wright as a contribution to the healing of the rift. However, the existential and visionary dimension of the book is much more difficult to pinpoint than in the case of *The Varieties of Goodness*. Because one of the main themes of the work is historical explanations it has a clear connection to the parts about Spengler and Toynbee in *Tanke och förkunnelse* and, also, some of what von Wright wrote about Tolstoy. However, it also should be remembered that in his collection of essays, von Wright had dealt with “*speculative philosophies of history*” in Dray’s sense,<sup>18</sup> whereas his own contribution mainly appears to be a contribution to the philosophy of history as a human science, with a focus on the nature of historical explanations. As such, the focus would seem to be on simply offering an account of the ways history is explained by historians, similar to the man-

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reflect upon and see more clearly *what* they do when, in fact, they make moral judgements. Such reflection may change, or it may fortify, their moral attitudes and thereby also their view of how moral judgements *should* be made” (von Wright 1989, 35).

<sup>18</sup>In William H. Dray’s terminology, *speculative* philosophy of history seeks to discover “patterns of meaning” in history, whereas *critical* philosophy of history only seeks to “make clear the nature of the historian’s own inquiry” (Dray 1964, 1).

ner in which philosophers of science have attempted to analyse the workings of explanations in the natural sciences. In such a project, there would not seem to be much room for the existential dimension, understood in terms of an outlet for the “yearning of a *Weltanschauung*”. Still, a closer examination of *Explanation and Understanding* reveals that there actually is room.

The main contention of the book is that explanation in history and the social sciences is *different in kind* from explanation in the natural sciences. Whereas the latter employs some form of a “covering law model”, in which that which is to be explained is subsumed under general laws, the basic unit of explanation in the sciences of man is the *practical syllogism*.<sup>19</sup> By this, von Wright’s means an explanation of action according to the following scheme:

*A* intended to do *y*.

*A* thought that unless he did *x*, he could not do *y*.

Therefore, *A* did *x*.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the action *x* done by *A* is explained by presenting an aim, *y*, which can only be achieved by doing *x*, according to what *A* believes. Obviously, it is not necessary that *x* actually *is* a necessary means to *y* in order for such an explanation to be valid, it only matters what *A* *thinks* is the case.

How did von Wright arrive at the conclusion that the practical syllogism forms an explanatory model in its own right, which is fundamental to the sciences of man? The roots of the idea that the sciences of man require a model of explanation different from the natural sciences is present in many of von Wright’s writings before *Explanation and Understanding*. In his essays on Spengler and Toynbee in *Tanke och förkunnelse*, von Wright had

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<sup>19</sup> “[W]hat the subsumption-theoretic model is to causal explanation and explanation in the natural sciences, the practical syllogism is to teleological explanation and explanation in history and the social sciences” (von Wright 1971, 27).

<sup>20</sup> This formulation of the practical syllogism is a generalized form of the inference presented by von Wright in von Wright (1971, 120).

already observed that the only type of “cause-like factors” we find in history are motives, reasons, purposes and the like, which may be contrasted with “causes of the type that would make it possible to put forward so called causal laws” (von Wright 1955b, 180).<sup>21</sup> A more elaborate statement of this view was advanced by von Wright in another article in 1968. Here he also provided an argument for why explanations of actions in terms of motives cannot be instances of the subsumption model in terms of the logical dependency between explanandum and explanans (von Wright 1968, 9). Acknowledging that there are cases when we speak of causes in history that are logically independent of their effects—such as when we say that the assassination at Sarajevo was one of the causes of World War I—von Wright argued that this is only seemingly the case, since the explanation may be broken into parts consisting of explanations of actions in terms of motives (1968, 12–13).

Thus, von Wright’s early accounts of historical explanation as *sui generis* simply seem to be based on the type of explanations he finds in history, together with the claim that such arguments, for logical reasons, are different in kind from explanations in terms of general laws. As such, these accounts do not suggest any specific connection between the life of von Wright and his scholarly position on historical explanations. In *Explanation and Understanding*, however, he pursues the question of the nature of historical explanations in a slightly different direction. For now, von Wright claims that there is no conclusive way of showing the truth of either a Hempelian deductive-nomological model for historical explanation or a teleological model. But neither is it satisfactory to say that both models contain *some* truth. For, ultimately, he writes, it is a matter of groundless, *existential choice*:

But there is also a basic opposition, removed from the possibility both of reconciliation and refutation—even, in a sense, removed

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<sup>21</sup> Author’s translation. The original passage in Swedish reads: “orsaker av det slag som gör det möjligt för oss att uppställa s.k. kausallagar”.

from the truth. It is built into the choice of primitives, of basic concepts for the whole argumentation. This choice, one could say, is “existential”. It is a choice of a point of view which cannot be further grounded. (von Wright 1971, 32)

On the face of it, the idea of a purely existential choice of an explanation model may not seem to be easy to combine with von Wright’s earlier writings on historical explanations. Only a few years earlier, had he not taken explanation in terms of motives as fundamental to history more or less as a *fact*? However, in *Explanation and Understanding*, von Wright had realised that there was an existential-ideological dimension to the way in which we understand history. Thus, although there is no way of showing that teleological explanations of the kind von Wright was advancing in *Explanation and Understanding* form the *right* perspective on history, it still seems possible to ask why they would appear as *existentially preferable* to von Wright at the time he was writing the book.

As we have seen, the practical syllogism forms the basic unit in von Wright’s account of historical explanations. This may suggest that the principal task of historians would be to focus on important moves by significant historical agents and to seek their explanations in terms of these agents’ aims and beliefs. In fact, such explanations are not uncommon in historiography. For instance, why did Hitler give orders to invade Norway and Denmark in 1940? Perhaps he wanted to secure access to Swedish iron ore and thought that this could only be achieved by invading the Nordic countries. However, such single explanations do not represent von Wright’s main interest. What he wanted to do was to prepare the ground for explaining the *process of historical change*. Thus, his main interest was not in how actions emerge from a static system of aims and beliefs of an agent, but in the *transformations* this system undergoes, which in their turn, may be used to explain changes in the agent’s course of action. This leads us to questions such as how various circumstances influence human behaviour, and most importantly, the political ques-

tion about how the actions of one agent may influence the actions of other agents. It is for purposes like these that von Wright ultimately used the practical syllogism in the book. Hence, he was focusing on the historical forces that influence what he also calls the “practical premises” of agents, that is, their aims and their beliefs about what actions will be necessary for their attainment.

To illustrate how a historical change may proceed, in *Explanation and Understanding* von Wright used the same example he used in the 1968 article about the assassination at Sarajevo as a cause of World War I. In the book it is called a “quasi-causal” explanation, in the sense that what looks like a causal explanation relating the explanandum to a logically independent explanans may be broken into a chain of practical inferences in which the resulting actions become part of the motivational background of a new action. Thus, roughly speaking, we may say that the assassination of the Austrian Archduke created a new situation in which the Austrian cabinet deemed the issuing of an ultimatum to Serbia necessary in order to attain its primary aims, leading to a new situation that prompted a practical inference by the Russian government, resulting in the mobilization of the army, which in turn created a new situation for the Austrian government, ultimately leading to the outbreak of the war (von Wright 1971, 139–45).

The explanation of the outbreak of World War I is an example of a chain of events in which what we call the “cause of the event”, using von Wright’s own metaphor, is the “spark which made the powder-barrel explode” (1971, 139). However, von Wright also used the practical syllogism to analyse another kind of social process, which brings us closer to the question of how *Explanation and Understanding* became “relevant to his life and his understanding of the world”. What I have in mind is his discussion of what perhaps could be called the *mechanisms of political activism*, although the notion of a “mechanism” should not be taken too literally. Von Wright explains it as analogous to the mechanism of *negative feedback* known from biology, for in-

stance. The example he uses is the accelerating of the breathing movements in the body when the oxygen level in the blood is starting to fall because of heavy muscular activity (1971, 156–57). In a similar way, political activists—or the “feedbackers”, as he called them—attempt to set things right when the consequences of the actions of the decision-makers are bad. In the latter case, however, the balancing reaction is not governed by causal laws, but occur through “motivational necessitation through practical inferences”. Basically, the thought is that some actions of a power group may motivate counter-measures by other agents through changing their beliefs about the courses of actions that are necessary in order to achieve their goals (i.e., a change in the second premise of the practical syllogism). In the absence of institutionalized channels for communication this may lead to “demonstrations, protests, strikes, sabotage, etc.” If effective, such measures may induce changes in the aims of the power group (the first premise of the practical syllogism), leading to actions that no longer call for counter-measures by the activists. In this sense, we could say that the equilibrium has been restored in the society (1971, 158–59).

That a section on activism was included in a book on the philosophy of history von Wright began to work on in the last turbulent years of the 1960s may not be that surprising. In his autobiography, von Wright even mentions that he witnessed the early stages of the student activity in Paris in April 1968 (von Wright 2001, 247). However, political participation had also started to have a personal side for von Wright. Inspired by American colleagues and friends during his visits to the USA, von Wright came to reflect on the ongoing war in Vietnam, which led him to write a polemical article with the title “Kriget mot Vietnam” (“The War Against Vietnam”), which was published in some newspapers in Finland and Sweden in November 1967, and somewhat later also in Denmark (see e.g., von Wright 1967). In the article, which marks the beginning of von Wright’s career as a Nordic intellectual, he took a critical view of the war the USA was conducting

in Vietnam. Later he would take part in many public debates and eventually he would become known as a harsh critic of the modern Western form of life. Most importantly, his political engagement also led him to reconsider some of his convictions about philosophy and the role of the philosopher, including the nature of a philosophy relevant to his life—“I will never regain my old self” (“Mitt gamla jag får jag aldrig tillbaka”), von Wright would later write about his protest against the war in Vietnam (von Wright 2001, 244).

I will return to these questions in the next section, but let me conclude here with some remarks about the way in which von Wright’s appearance as a participating intellectual in the late 1960s is linked with *Explanation and Understanding*, giving his claim that the book had contributed to a healing of the rift some content. To begin with, his analysis of the mechanisms of political activism is not simply to be seen as a detached analysis of a contemporary phenomenon by an academic bystander to the world. It deals with structures von Wright was beginning to feel he was a part of. In this way, his analysis may be seen as being integrated with the emerging of his own identity as a “feedbacker” of the system. However, I believe that there is also a more subtle way in which *Explanation and Understanding* relates to the new political side of von Wright. This brings us back to the question of von Wright’s motivation to see the teleological perspective on history as an *existentially preferable* point of view.

To adopt a teleological perspective on history and society of the type von Wright advances in *Explanation and Understanding* is closely related to the idea of action as the *driving force* of history and political change. Furthermore, as von Wright willingly admitted in “Intellectual Autobiography”, in the book, the approach to the question is strongly *individualistic*. Accordingly, he is not elaborating questions about the way in which action presupposes institutions and practices or the way in which collective actions are related to individual actions (von Wright 1989, 41). However, this does not mean that collective action would

not be mentioned in *Explanation and Understanding*, but the practical syllogism based on individual aims and beliefs remains the primary model for how actions should be understood.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it may be justified to say that von Wright's individualistic approach to the philosophy of history is oversimplified. However, it also seems possible to think that at the time of writing *Explanation and Understanding*, von Wright felt a strong inclination to advance a view of history that left a space for individuals to *make a difference*. Obviously, the people he had in mind were not only activists like Gavrilo Princip, but also several contemporary people who stood up against the war in Vietnam—including himself.

## 5. Postscript 1980 and the Shift in Existential Focus

So far, I have adopted the role of the “perceptive reader” envisaged by von Wright in “Intellectual Autobiography” by proposing some interpretations of his books *The Varieties of Goodness* and *Explanation and Understanding* designed to explain why he thought that these works contributed to a healing of the rift in his philosophical personality. As already noted, however, the sense of a healing was not to last, because in the sombre “Postscript 1980” at the end of “Intellectual Autobiography” von Wright writes as follows:

I have mentioned a rift in my philosophical personality between an awareness of the narrowly restricted relevance of my professional work and a craving for a more ‘visionary’ grasp of the totality of human existence. I still feel and I am often tormented by this split in me. The literary manifestations of my search for a *Weltanschauung* have remained ‘essayistic’ in form and their language, with a few exceptions . . . , has been my mother tongue, Swedish. A main theme of these writings from later years has been technology, the man-nature relationship, and the future of our civilization.

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<sup>22</sup>At the time, von Wright seemed to think of collective action as *analogous* to individual action, in a way that “could be worked out in great detail” (von Wright 1971, 133).

Compared with the optimism expressed in the 1973 part of “Intellectual Autobiography”, it seems obvious, that the rift had reopened at the end of the 1970s. It is also evident that von Wright no longer believed that the rift could be tackled by using his professional philosophical tools, leaving his essay writings in Swedish as the only outlet for what he now called his “search for a *Weltanschauung*”. The strong expression he used to describe his state of mind—*being tormented*—should, of course, be noted.

So, we may assume that something had happened during the period between 1973 and 1980 that decisively affected the prospects of a healing of the rift. However, I do not think that we should look for the explanation in any crucial event in the life of von Wright during precisely these years. Neither do I think that the ethical existential perspective of *The Varieties* would have completely lost its interest for him. What rather seems to have occurred was a change in existential focus that would seem to be just another consequence of his new-born role as a participating intellectual in the wake of the Vietnam protest of 1967, which made him see the way in which *Explanation and Understanding* fell short.

As we have seen, von Wright's experience was that the Vietnam protest had affected a fundamental change in him, which he also described as adopting humanism as his “attitude to life” (“livshållning”) (von Wright 2001, 244). His own account of the background of the Vietnam article may easily leave the impression that this transformation simply *happened* because of his presence in the USA at a time when the protests against the war were growing stronger. Still, it is noteworthy how beautifully the Vietnam article fits into the space between *The Varieties of Goodness* and *Explanation and Understanding*. Beginning with the former, it seems evident that adopting an attitude to life concerned with human welfare is what we may expect from a philosopher who has arrived at a definition of morally good and bad actions in terms of the beneficial and the harmful by a process he experienced as “work on himself”. In his polemical article on the

war in Vietnam, the humanist orientation is clearly seen in his way of seeing the war as “a war against *the people* of Vietnam” (“ett krig mot det vietnamesiska folket”) (von Wright 1967). Neither should it be surprising that among its topics, *Explanation and Understanding* contains traces of the first political outlet of a deepened moral concern, i.e., the Vietnam protest. However, it seems clear that von Wright’s “political awakening” also entailed a shift in his most pertinent existential demands on his philosophy. Being occupied with the Vietnam war also made von Wright discover the importance of *challenging* the prevalent *Weltbild* of a society, which he saw as the very essence of the role of an “intellectual as a critic of his times” (von Wright 1989, 20–21). It was this critical task he most urgently needed philosophical tools to handle. Equipped with the practical syllogism, however, he could at the very most only clarify what *kind* of interaction a political reaction against a power structure basically is—as the activity of “feedbackers” of a society out of balance. What the analytical approach of *Explanation and Understanding* did not seem able to do was to provide support for an intellectual *critic of the times*. In the book “critical philosophy” was mainly represented by some references to the philosophy of Karl Marx. However, these came only in the form of rather loose associations between the theory of Marx and von Wright’s own analysis of action.<sup>23</sup>

Von Wright’s move towards becoming a critic of his times is also reflected in the collection of essays *Humanismen som livshållning* (*Humanism as an Attitude to Life*), which was published in 1978. Among other things, the book also contains a section on Marx and Marxism. Basically, it has the form of an overview, but it seems clear that von Wright was attracted by the Marxian way of relating the cultural “superstructure” to the “productive

<sup>23</sup>For instance, von Wright makes the logical point that his own analysis of what I have called “the mechanisms of activism”, captures at least something of the dialectical “double negation” process described by Marx (and Hegel) (von Wright 1971, 160).

forces” of the base, and, especially, its relationship with technological development. However, the *form* of publication is also noteworthy. *Humanismen som livshållning* may also be seen as von Wright’s return to the *genre* of essays in Swedish. The book includes some essays from the late 1950s and the early 1960s, together with new material such as the already-mentioned section on Marx. Specifically concerning the section on Marx, it also means returning to the mode of dealing with “life-relevant philosophy” only in the form of “a personal commentary” (“en personlig kommentar”) on thoughts von Wright found particularly engaging at the time (von Wright 1978b, 134). Clearly, this may be seen as just another sign of the methodological troubles he had at the time.<sup>24</sup>

## 6. “In Search of the Present”

At the end of the 1970s, von Wright had arrived at a point at which he felt a growing need to engage himself in a “critique of his time”, or a “critical concern for the condition of man”, as he also called it (von Wright 1989, 21). It would also seem clear that he had come to believe that analytical philosophy did not provide sufficient resources for this type of critical work.<sup>25</sup> At

<sup>24</sup>As an indication of the reorientation of von Wright’s existential concerns we may also see his publication in 1977 of a selection of “general remarks” by Ludwig Wittgenstein with the title *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, also known as the German-English parallel edition *Culture and Value*, which appeared three years later. As a main motive for the publication we may see von Wright’s desire to advance an understanding of Wittgenstein as a critic of his times, in a spirit similar to von Wright’s own (von Wright 1980, iie; 1982b).

<sup>25</sup>See for instance the 1997 interview in which von Wright, referring to the difference between logical-analytical work and the methodological requirements on his “time-critical activities” (“zeitkritische Beschäftigungen”), says as follows: “Precisely because the material is different, the method of handling it must be different, the one is logical-analytical and the other is of another kind”. Author’s translation, the original in German reads: “Eben weil das Material verschieden ist, muß auch die Behandlungsmethode sich unterscheiden, die eine ist logisch-analytisch und die andere ist andersartig” (von Wright 1997, 269).

this point he could not remain satisfied simply with the return to the mode of reflecting on the works of prominent thinkers in the critical genre, with the hope of inspiring others to do the same, as he had done in *Tanke och förkunnelse*, and continued to do in his 1978 essays on Marx. Instead, he elaborated a semi-historical way of approaching the problems of his times, which came to have its clearest application in his 1986 book *Vetenskapen och förnuftet* (*Science and Reason*). Viewed as a strategy for dealing with the rift, this also meant a novel approach. It would seem that by not being able to tackle his existential concerns by using his entrenched analytical professional tools, von Wright developed a “less scientific” approach to the matters he felt were urgent,<sup>26</sup> which he called “in search of the present” (von Wright 2003, 87) or “a diagnostic of the times”. Von Wright has described this method on several occasions, but among the more substantial is the following from an article originally in Swedish from the mid-1990s:

I have called my efforts a diagnostic of the times. My procedure may briefly be described as follows: I begin by focusing on features and tendencies that to me seem most typical for our time. Then I enquire into their origins, the particular dynamics of history that has created them. And finally, I attempt to project them on what I call the screen of the future, under the assumption that they, on the whole, continue as before. The image that emerges on the screen may then give occasion for reflections on the possibility and the desirability of changing the course. (von Wright 1994b, 316)<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup>“It is not science in the strict sense of the word—nor should it purport to be”, von Wright explains about his method (von Wright 2003, 87).

<sup>27</sup>Author’s translation of the original Swedish text: “Jag har kallat mina bemödanden tidsdiagnostik. Mitt tillvägagångssätt kan kort beskrivas så här: Först fokuserar jag betraktelsen på drag och trender som tycks mig mest typiska för vår tid. Sedan frågar jag efter deras ursprung, den historiens dynamik som drivit fram dem. Och slutligen försöker jag precisera trenderna på det jag kallar framtidens bildskärm, under förutsättningen att de fortfar i stort sett oförändrade. Den bild som visar sig på skärmen kan sedan ge anledning till betraktelser om möjligheten och önskvärdheten att påverka trenderna.”

It is easy to see how such a method could appeal to von Wright as a “participating philosopher”. The purpose of the envisaged historical-futurological exposition is obviously to suggest where the society may be heading, if it does not find the means to change its course. In *Vetenskapen och förnuftet* he uses the method in order to trace the prevalent dominance of *technical rationality* in Western society, i.e., a type of rationality that concerns itself only with the *means* to realize various goals, not with the goals themselves (von Wright 1986, 17). Von Wright sees this feature as being responsible for some major problems haunting our civilization, ranging from environmental concerns to the depreciation of human value. A major theme of the book is the tracing of the roots of the dominance of technical rationality to the rise of modern science. However, there is also a subtheme related to a corresponding decline of a capacity to reason about values which had been so central in ancient thinking. Although the mood of the book is quite pessimistic, von Wright ultimately places his hope in a reorientation of our values (1986, 116, 153).

It should be noted that von Wright’s time diagnostic has two parts. One is the historical-futurological part in which he attempts to place a prominent cultural feature in a historical context, which he projects into the future. But there is also another part that he has described as focusing on features and tendencies that *to him* seemed to be the most defining of the times. Of course, such features and tendencies could be both positive and negative—perhaps even neutral—but von Wright was looking for some fundamental *problems* of our age, such as the dominance of technical rationality, or the adherence to false images of progress, which would be a later theme in his time-diagnostic writings (see von Wright 1993f). But *how* does he identify these “sicknesses of our time”, to use Wittgensteinian language (Wittgenstein 1978, II, 23)? Although he also gains some support from similar thoughts advanced by others, most notably Adorno and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School, it seems clear that his ultimate ground is his own *vision* of the state of the

world. This might make us wonder why he now allowed himself to do what he would not at the time of *Tanke och förkunnselse*, when he chose only to *reflect* on the thoughts of more visionary philosophers and writers.

One part of the explanation could be that after all, there is a certain continuity between the philosophical work von Wright had done, especially in *The Varieties of Goodness* and his later time diagnostic. For in both cases there is a subjective part in the investigation which acts in combination with a framework derived by a systematic investigation. In the former case, von Wright is “in search of the meaning” of moral concepts by attempting to reconcile his own moral intuitions with a framework of non-moral value concepts. In the latter, the framework is provided by the traced historical context, whereas the “subjective input” is von Wright’s vision of the fundamental problem of our age.<sup>28</sup>

Still, we may ask how a time-diagnostic method of the kind von Wright conducted in *Vetenskapen och förnuftet* could have had any appeal to a professional analytical philosopher of von Wright’s stature? A simple answer is that it did not appeal to him much. Thus, he always appeared modest about his time-diagnostic writings.<sup>29</sup> However, it may be of some interest that it is also possible to see at least some kinship between von Wright’s analytical ideals and the systematic part of his time-diagnostic approach. It has also been noted by himself. In the introduction to his 1994 collection of essays *Att förstå sin samtid (To Understand One’s Time)* von Wright notes a certain similarity between his time diagnostic of the 1980s and 1990s and the method employed in an early essay reprinted in the book, “Om framtiden”

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<sup>28</sup>The point I am making seems close to what von Wright meant by saying that both the “ethical method” of *The Varieties* and his later time-critical work involve “creative activity” (“schaffende Tätigkeit”) (von Wright 1997, 271).

<sup>29</sup>Von Wright, for instance, writes, “I have no clear conception of the value and significance of acting as a free intellectual in this sense. Were someone to say that my activities are completely worthless, I would not know how to defend myself” (von Wright 2003, 87).

(“About the Future”) from 1945. In that connection, von Wright was concerned with the question about how to investigate the future, and offered the following suggestion for a methodology:

We choose some viewpoints on a greater historical connection and direct our attention to a development or change these viewpoints reveal. Then we try to figure out where this development would lead if it was to be continued. *It is less a question about speculating about the future than about elaborating a logical argument from the premises at hand.* (von Wright 1994c, 24; emphasis added)<sup>30</sup>

What is noteworthy is that the analytical philosopher and logician von Wright likens the early version of his time-diagnostic method with nothing less than a *logical argument*. Furthermore, he overtly contrasts it with “speculations” about the future. Thus, in the mid-1940s, von Wright was tempted to see the proposed way of investigating the future as a rigorous method, which was not entirely different in kind from the methods he was just beginning to use in his professional work. It seems possible that he still felt at least an *inclination* to think in the same manner when he commenced his time-diagnostic work in the mid-1980s.

## 7. Von Wright’s Final Position on the Rift

As we have seen, although there were some respects in which von Wright was able to experience his time-diagnostic work as a continuation of his professional approaches to philosophy, the method employed in *Vetenskapen och förnuftet* would still seem to be quite remote from his original adherence to the “spirit of exact rationality”. It may therefore come as somewhat of a

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<sup>30</sup>Author’s translation of the Swedish: “Vi väljer några synpunkter på ett större historiskt sammanhang och fäster oss vid en utveckling eller förändring som dessa synpunkter blottar. Sedan försöker vi tänka oss in i vart denna utveckling skulle leda om den finge löpa linan ut. Det blir inte så mycket fråga om att spekulera om framtiden som att utveckla ett logiskt resonemang ur föreliggande premisser”.

surprise that, in what would be his final statement on the split in his philosophical mind, von Wright had returned to the positive mood of the early 1970s, once more experiencing that the rift had begun to heal. For this is what he writes in a passage from his 2001 autobiography:

But I believe myself to be able to say that the two worlds have slowly begun to fuse to the extent that history-philosophical and time-critical sides of the existential questions have come more to the forefront. But this development did not start in earnest until I wrote *Explanation and Understanding* in the 1970s.

(von Wright 2001, 111)<sup>31</sup>

We immediately notice that *The Varieties of Goodness* is no longer mentioned. I will return to this question in the concluding section. Where does von Wright now derive the idea of a *fusing* of the two worlds from? We get some important clues from an earlier statement on the matter, included in the introduction to *The Tree of Knowledge*:

In a sense . . . exploring the second grove [*sic*, groove] in my intellectual life has made me a critic of the form of rationality which has been my moving force in the first grove. This has established a relationship between the two groves which was initially missing. It cannot, however, be said to have fused them into a uniform way of doing philosophy. But perhaps my critique of the times has also taught me a lesson of wholesome self-criticism.

(von Wright 1993c, 4)

Thus, we learn that, in the first place, the fusing he later was talking about does not happen at a methodological level. The different “grooves” are brought together only by the insight that the professional-methodological side—i.e., logical-analytical thinking—could be seen as belonging to von Wright’s

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<sup>31</sup>Author’s translation of the Swedish: “Men jag tror mig kunna säga att de två världarna långsamt börjat smälta ihop i samma mån som de historiefilosofiska och tidskritiska sidorna av den existentiella problematiken trätt mera i förgrunden. Men denna utveckling satte på allvar in först på 1970-talet när jag skrev *Explanation and Understanding*.”

existential concerns by being associated with the (technical) form of rationality he had criticized so vehemently. Of course, this manner of bringing the two worlds together is quite different from the initial quest for a valid methodological approach to the problems of life. However, it also has some significant consequences for the original problem of the rift. In a way, we may say that von Wright simply *dissolves* it.

Here is why. Von Wright’s original concern with the rift was intimately related to his adherence to the ideal of an “exact rationality” in the shape of a strictly logical-analytical approach to philosophy. However, towards the end of his life he came to believe that the alliance between such a way of thinking and one of the most pertinent roots of the problems of our age, the dominance of technical rationality, also made logical-analytical methods *unsuitable* for tackling the most important issues humanity was facing. Or, as he explains it:

The form of rationality represented by science and technology has become problematic due to its repercussions on society and the living conditions of men. Analytic philosophy, itself an offspring of belief in progress through science, appears inherently incapable of coping with these problems. (von Wright 1993d, 25).

In this sense, there is no longer a demand for the application of the methods of exact rationality to the existential realm. On the contrary, according to von Wright, it is clear from the outset that such attempts will be unsuccessful, at least in so far as the aim is to offer a philosophical critique of our times. However, von Wright did not see this as the end of philosophy, or the end of a philosophy relevant to life. Instead he started to defend a view of philosophy as an endeavour conditioned by its times—“Big shifts in the centre of philosophy signalize changes in the general cultural atmosphere which in their turn reflect changes in political, economic and social conditions”, he wrote in an article originally published in 1992 (von Wright 1993a, 24).<sup>32</sup> This also

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<sup>32</sup>An early step in this direction was the article “Wittgenstein in Relation to

means that he was now open to the possibility of the emergence of forms of philosophy more capable of dealing with the “new clouds calling for the philosopher’s attention”, which are rising on the philosophical horizon (1993d, 24). This does not mean that he necessarily would have believed that his own attempts to “search for the present” could be taken as indications of where philosophy is heading—his belittling of his own achievements certainly do not suggest so. However, it seems clear why he no longer felt confined by his earlier methodological ideals.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

Von Wright’s “dissolution of the problem” may need some qualifications. I will end my essay with some reflections about this, which also summarize some important elements of my discussion of von Wright’s problem with the rift. We may start by asking what happened to the self-edifying approach to existential issues of *The Varieties of Goodness*. Since it is no longer mentioned in the quote from the 2001 autobiography, it might seem like von Wright would have disqualified it as a contribution to the healing of the rift on the ground that it involves analytical methods. On the other hand, from the autobiography it is also clear that von Wright still believed that *The Varieties* was the best book he had written, which would indicate that he continued to see it as an achievement in the existential respect.<sup>33</sup> The obvious reason for omitting the reference to the value-theoretical work is the existential shift from a personal ethics to a social concern I have emphasized. Thus, strictly speaking, what von Wright wants to argue in his final statements on the rift is that logical-analytical

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his Times”, which was first published in 1978. In this, von Wright advances a view of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy as a kind of reaction to problems deeply inherent in the Western Culture (von Wright 1982b).

<sup>33</sup>See also the 1997 interview, in which von Wright still wanted to emphasize the edifying impact of his “creative” (“shaffende”) work on moral concepts (von Wright 1997, 270).

methods are not suitable for a *critique* or *diagnosis* of our times, which does not commit him to the claim that analytical methods could not be used to address *any kind* of existential concerns.

There is still one aspect of von Wright’s philosophy and the rift he experienced that should be mentioned, which brings us back to *Explanation and Understanding*. In Section 4 I have already pointed to von Wright’s own claim that, ultimately, the models for explanation in history and other human sciences can only be based on an *existential choice*. In this sense, they are not independent of the outlook of the philosopher or researcher. Thus, there is still another space for a “subjective input” in von Wright’s philosophy that is certainly not restricted to *Explanation and Understanding* but is also visible in later works like *Causality and Determinism* (1974) and *In the Shadow of Descartes* (1998). As a common ground for all three works, we may see the effort to take *human action* as the basic approach to questions concerning explanation, determinism and philosophy of mind.<sup>34</sup> In this connection I will not attempt to give an account of how the action-based approach to these issues could be related to von Wright’s humanism or his attitude to his time. But it seems quite clear that there *is* a connection which may also imply a reconsideration of the role of analytic philosophy for the question of the rift. However, it should also be pointed out that von Wright may not have seen the existential dimensions of his later analytical work very clearly. The reason may be that he tended to see the rift in terms of different philosophical *problems* and how they should be approached and not as the question of how a philosophical approach is based on the outlook of the philosopher.

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<sup>34</sup>For the last point, specifically, see also von Wright (1997, 277).

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