

# BIOGRAPHY AND THEORY RECONSIDERED: SECOND WITTGENSTEINIAN THOUGHTS

Ray Monk

1. 'Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding', *Poetics Today*, 28, 3 (Fall 2007): 527-570.

2. A turning point in this development, I argue, is provided by the essays on biography written in the 1920s and 1930s by Virginia Woolf, which criticise traditional biographies for ignoring the inner life of their subjects and the 'new biographers' for (necessarily) resorting to fiction when attempting to convey the 'rainbow-like intangibility' of that inner life. For (much) more on this, see my article, 'This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography, Reality and Character', *Philosophy and Literature*, 31, 1-40, 2007.

3. Oswald Hanfling, 'The Use of "Theory" in Philosophy' in Erich Ammereller and Eugen Fischer (eds), *Wittgenstein at Work: Method in the Philosophical Investigations*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp183-200.

In an article published last year,<sup>1</sup> I argued that biography offered, or should offer if done properly, a paradigm example of Wittgenstein's notion of 'the understanding that consists in seeing connections' (*Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, paragraph 122), a type of understanding that Wittgenstein identified as his goal in philosophy and which, crucially, is *non-theoretical*. Biography, I maintained, is a perfect exemplar of this kind of understanding and, as such, it is fundamentally mistaken, either to search for a theory of biography or to read or write biography as if it were in any way a theoretical enterprise. I developed this view through a four-pronged assault: 1. a survey of the scholarly, but non-academic literature on biography from Dr Johnson to the early twentieth century, seeking to identify the forces that pulled it in the direction of theory;<sup>2</sup> 2. an examination of the work of those biographers who have approached their task in a consciously theoretical manner; 3. a critical engagement with the recent theoretical literature about biography; and 4. an application to biography of Wittgenstein's non-theoretical notion of philosophical understanding.

I want in this present essay to respond to a difficulty in my argument that centres on the notion of 'theory' as that notion is variously understood by (a) Wittgenstein, (b) some theorists and (c) the general public. At the heart of the difficulty is the thought that Wittgenstein and I may be using the word 'theory' in an artificially and illegitimately narrow way that is not in conformity with its normal usage. This thought, as it applies to Wittgenstein (but not in connection with either my work or biography), has been explored in some depth and with no little subtlety by the late Oswald Hanfling in his article 'The Use of "Theory" in Philosophy'.<sup>3</sup> Hanfling begins by noting a strong connection in Wittgenstein's work between his insistence that philosophy is non-theoretical and his equally fervent insistence that philosophy is not a science. *Philosophical Investigations* Part I, paragraph 109, which contains his famous and oft-quoted remarks about theory ('And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation* and description alone must take its place') begins: 'It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific one', an allusion, Hanfling persuasively suggests, to *Tractatus* 4.111: 'Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences'.

Does Wittgenstein think that saying that philosophy is not a theoretical discipline *is the same thing* as saying that it is not a science? Does he think,

in other words, that scientific theories are the only kind? Well, it certainly seems to be true that the words he uses to characterise theories are those most commonly associated with science. As Hanfling puts it:

A theory, as indicated in those passages [*Philosophical Investigations* §109, 126] is put forward with the purpose of *explaining* as opposed to *describing*, and the explaining is done by reference to something that is *hidden*, as opposed to *lying open to view*. Such theories may be *hypothetical*, and the problems with which they deal are *empirical* ones.<sup>4</sup>

4. Hanfling, "The Use of "Theory"", op. cit., p189.

What is being described here, surely, is, first and foremost a scientific theory.

When characterising Wittgenstein's use of the word 'theory' in *Philosophical Investigations*, however, it is worth bearing in mind that the available sample is very small. In fact, paragraph 109 is the only place in the entire book in which the word occurs. It is nonetheless a crucial word. Elsewhere in Wittgenstein's work, it is possible to find several instances of the word being used to describe what Wittgenstein is *not* doing. For instance: 'What we do is the opposite of theorizing. Theory blinds' (MS 133, 1946-47), 'What we are not looking for is a 'philosophical theory'' (MS130, 1946), and, when his discussions with the Vienna Circle touched on the subject of ethics and the attempt to understand the notion of moral value, he remarked:

If I were told anything that was a *theory*, I would say, No, no! That does not interest me. Even if this theory were true, it would not interest me - it would not be the exact thing I was looking for.

What is ethical cannot be taught. If I could explain the essence of the ethical only by means of a theory, then what is ethical would be of no value whatsoever.

... For me, a theory is without value. A theory gives me nothing.<sup>5</sup>

5. *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations recorded by Friedrich Waismann*, edited by Brian McGuinness, Oxford, Blackwell, 1979, pp116-117.

In the same spirit is Wittgenstein's reaction in his 1938 lectures on aesthetics when one of his students, Rush Rhees, asked him about his 'theory' of deterioration (Wittgenstein had earlier spoken of the history of German music as an illustration of the deterioration of a 'very high culture'). 'Do you think I have a theory?' Wittgenstein asked, clearly horrified. 'Do you think I'm saying what deterioration is? What I do is describe different things called deterioration'.<sup>6</sup>

6. *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Cyril Barrett (ed), Oxford, Blackwell, 1978, p10.

Might this horror of having a theory ascribed to him rest on an overly restrictive notion of what a theory is? After all, as Hanfling reminds us: 'The scientific understanding of 'theory' is not, however, the only one'.<sup>7</sup> The word is, of course, used in many other contexts. Hanfling mentions in particular history and philosophy, though he might equally have added, to name but a few, politics, literature, psychology, sociology, music - and, most pertinently for my purposes, biography.

7. Hanfling, "The Use of "Theory"", op. cit., p185.

It is not just that Wittgenstein, as it were, turns a blind eye to the use of the word ‘theory’ in these non-scientific contexts. He also seems to dispute their legitimacy. So, anyway, one might infer from the following remark from *On Colour*:

Goethe’s theory of the origin of the spectrum *isn’t* a theory of its origin that has proved unsatisfactory; it is really not a theory at all. *Nothing* can be predicted by means of it. It is, rather, a vague schematic outline, of the sort we find in James’s psychology. There is no *experimentum crucis* for Goethe’s *Farbenlehre*.<sup>8</sup>

8. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, G.E.M.Anscombe (ed), Oxford, Blackwell, III §125, (see also I §70, which seems to be an earlier version of the same remark). I have kept the German title of Goethe’s work, since the translation ‘theory of colour’ (especially when provided with neither capital letters nor italics) is not only problematic in itself (*Lehre* means ‘teaching’ rather than ‘theory’), it also makes a nonsense of what Wittgenstein is saying.

9. See, for example, I §22, II §16, III §188.

10. Hanfling, ‘The Use of “Theory”’, op. cit., p186.

11. Ibid..

12. Ibid..

The most natural interpretation of this passage - an interpretation supported by the rest of *Remarks on Colour*<sup>9</sup> - is that Wittgenstein denies that Goethe’s phenomenological investigations are a contribution to science and *therefore* refuses to accept that they should be regarded as constituting a *theory*, the clear implication being that *only* if they could be regarded as science could they possibly count as theory.

The problem with this, of course, is that it does not conform - it does not even come close to conforming - to how the word ‘theory’ is used in day-to-day life, a fact which ought to concern anyone who seeks to pursue philosophy in a Wittgensteinian spirit. In a move that has enormous rhetorical power and raises in its sharpest form the difficulty both in Wittgenstein’s work and in my own earlier argument, Hanfling takes Wittgenstein’s famous remark in *Philosophical Investigations* 246 (‘If we are using the word ‘to know’ as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am in pain’), and simply replaces ‘to know’ with ‘theory’:

If we are using the word ‘theory’ as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it!) then theories are often of that [non-scientific] kind.<sup>10</sup>

Wittgensteinians, this rhetorical ploy serves to remind us, cannot afford to be indifferent, ignorant or insensitive to how words are actually used. When discussing whether Wittgenstein’s work is or is not putting forward a theory, or whether biography is or is not fundamentally non-theoretical, it will not do to ride roughshod over perfectly ordinary uses of the word ‘theory’.

As Hanfling observes, despite Wittgenstein’s vehement insistence on the non-theoretical nature of his own work, the description of his own views as ‘theories’ would be in accordance with ‘an established usage’.<sup>11</sup> The ‘established usage’ in question is one in which ‘theory’ means nothing more than ‘view’ or ‘opinion’, a usage Hanfling describes as a ‘dilution’, analogous to the use of ‘argue’ to mean no more than ‘state’, ‘dilemma’ to mean simply ‘difficulty’, and ‘refute’ to mean merely ‘reject’. A word is used in a ‘diluted sense’, Hanfling explains, when its usage ‘obliterates recognition of the distinctive and interesting phenomenon for which the expression was coined’.<sup>12</sup> Such dilutions may (or may not) be regrettable and irritating, but

their occurrence is common and if we are to adopt the Wittgensteinian view that the meaning of the word is its use, then, given that there seems little justification for excluding *these* kinds of use, we seem forced to accept that 'argue' *can* mean simply 'state' and that 'theory' can mean simply 'view'. This would appear to leave both Wittgenstein's insistence that his work is 'the opposite of theory' and my view that biography is fundamentally non-theoretical floundering for lack of support. Worse than that even, they would both emerge as theories themselves - indeed, false theories.

Of course, one might respond to this by insisting that what Wittgenstein wants to say about philosophy and what I want to say about biography could be said without using the word 'theory'. What we want to say, it might be claimed, is that it is not the purpose of philosophy or biography to offer the kind of explanations that are offered in science, the kind that appeals to hypotheses, general laws and such like. And, clearly, this point could be made without trying to squeeze the various uses of the word 'theory' into a box too small to contain them, since it does not require *any* use of the word. But there are signs in Wittgenstein's work that his point could not quite be captured in this way, that the word 'theory' is precisely the one he needs to use. After all, he could, in paragraph 109, have been specific that it was *scientific* theories that philosophers could not advance, but in fact he did exactly the opposite. 'We may not advance *any kind of theory*', he says there. And I, too, want to insist that it is the notion of *theory* from which I want to separate biography.

Well, then, what *is* our notion of 'theory'? In my previous article, I made use of a definition of 'theory' put forward by Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey in their editors' introduction to the collection of essays, *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*.<sup>13</sup> Acknowledging that theories 'come in many shapes and sizes' (p2), Allen and Turvey claim that 'despite this variety, theories tend to possess two basic features':

First, they unify a range of apparently disparate, unconnected phenomena by postulating an underlying principle that these phenomena putatively have in common and that can explain their nature or behaviour. Second, the common, underlying principle postulated by the theory - whether it takes the form of an entity, process, force, concept, or something else - is at least initially hidden from view.

... By a theory we mean in this volume a form of explanation that possesses both of these features.

This is not a bad attempt to capture the notion of theory and has the great merit of being broad enough to apply, not only to scientific theories, but also to, for example, philosophical ones (it applies, for example, to the 'picture theory of meaning' in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*). But, of course, it does not fit *everything* that is called a 'theory', whether in a diluted or (what one could perhaps in contrast call) a concentrated sense. And, in any case, it now seems to me that an appeal to a definition, *any* definition, even one as carefully

13. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (eds), *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*, London, Routledge, 2001.

couched as that of Allen and Turvey, does not sit well with the Wittgensteinian insistence on the irreducible variety, the fluidity and the non-essentialist nature of our language. Like ‘game’ (*Philosophical Investigations* § 66) and ‘number’ (§ 67), ‘theory’, surely, is a ‘family resemblance concept’. That is to say, there is not *one* thing that is the essence, *the* defining characteristic of the concept, nor, *pace* Allen and Turvey are there *two* such characteristics. Rather, like the various possible likenesses that go to make up the notion of ‘family resemblance’ (the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the voice, etc.), there is a whole host of overlapping characteristics that collectively constitute our notion of ‘theory’. To be sure, the notion *includes* the forms of explanation that possess the two features singled out by Allen and Turvey, but it is by no means exhausted by them. And, when faced with something called a theory which does *not* possess those two features, it now seems to me that the proper response is not to deny the propriety of this use of the word but to acknowledge the variety of uses that the word has.

A further appreciation of that variety might be gained from looking at how the word ‘theory’ is used in literary studies, where, of course, it has become a matter of some importance to clarify what, exactly, is meant by it. Some of the most notable attempts to achieve such clarity show how extended the family of concepts called ‘theory’ has become and reveal uses of the word that have only distant connections to Wittgenstein’s use of the word, the definition offered by Allen and Turvey, or the ‘diluted sense’ identified and discussed by Hanfling.

In an article provocatively entitled ‘Against Theory’, that was published some twenty-six years ago and that aroused a good deal of debate and discussion,<sup>14</sup> Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels begin with this definition: ‘By ‘theory’ we mean a special project in literary criticism: the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general’.<sup>15</sup> This use of the word ‘theory’, though clearly different from that defined by Allen and Turvey, is distinctly recognisable as a member of the same family, sharing some characteristic features. They both, for example, refer to something that seeks to bring diverse phenomena together through an underlying general principle. Where they differ is on the distinction emphasised by Wittgenstein between explanation and description. On the Allen and Turvey definition, something only counts as a theory if it seeks to *explain* a range of phenomena, whereas (though this is neither discussed nor made explicit by Knapp and Michaels) on the Knapp/Michaels definition, it looks like the ‘account of interpretation in general’ to which ‘theory’ appeals might be descriptive rather than explanatory. In any case, theory on the Knapp/Michaels definition is certainly a long way from satisfying the rather strict criteria that Wittgenstein invoked in his discussion of Goethe (the existence of an *experimentum crucis* that would test predictions based upon it) or even the less strict characterisation of Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘theory’ quoted earlier from Hanfling’s paper. Nor, finally, could one identify Knapp and Michaels’ definition as the ‘diluted sense’ discussed by Hanfling. What is

14. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, ‘Against Theory’, *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (summer 1982), pp723-742.

15. Knapp and Michaels, *op. cit.*, p723.

specified in Knapp and Michaels' article, then, is a sense of the word 'theory' that is not identical with *any* of the previously discussed senses. Moreover, it seems to be one that has some established use. In the plethora of articles that responded to Knapp and Michaels, there was widespread acceptance of their *definition* of 'theory'; what was controversial was their view that, so defined, it was inconsequential and therefore worthless.

Not that *everyone* in the field of literary studies uses the word 'theory' in a way that is consistent with the definition given by Knapp and Michaels. In his book, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*,<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Culler devotes his first chapter to the question 'What is theory?', and comes up with something very different from all the other answers discussed so far. He begins by noting that the word 'theory' 'gestures in two directions':

16. Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997.

On the one hand, we speak of 'the theory of relativity', for example, an established set of propositions. On the other hand, there is the most ordinary use of the word *theory*.

'Why did Laura and Michael split up?'

'Well, my theory is that . . .'

What does theory mean here? First, theory signals 'speculation'. But a theory is not the same as a guess. 'My guess is that . . .' would suggest that there is a right answer, which I don't happen to know: 'My guess is that Laura just got tired of Michael's carping, but we'll find out for sure when their friend Mary gets here.' A theory, by contrast, is speculation that might not be affected by what Mary says, an explanation whose truth or falsity might be hard to demonstrate (p2).

Culler's characterisation of the first sense of 'theory' is so hurried and sloppy that it is difficult to know what, exactly, he is trying to capture. Is he, for example, trying to describe the scientific sense of 'theory'? If so, he misses the mark woefully. It is surely *not* the defining characteristic of scientific theories that they constitute an 'established set of propositions'. In fact, something is often called a 'theory' in the scientific sense to indicate precisely that it is not yet established. If and when what it states is accepted as established fact, it often ceases to be described as a 'theory'. An example Hanfling gives is the prehistoric movement of continents, originally propounded in a 'theory', but now regarded as an established truth and *therefore* no longer spoken of as a theory. This is not to say that we never use the word 'theory' to describe established truths. On the contrary, we frequently do, and the theory of relativity is, perhaps (though not, I think, incontrovertibly), an example, but it does suggest that it is hardly a defining characteristic of scientific theories that they are *established*. Consider, for example, the way opponents of evolution often stress that it is 'only a theory'. In any case, if Culler's characterisation of the scientific use of the word 'theory' were correct, it would be impossible to propound *new* theories (since a new theory could not possibly have the characteristic of being an 'established set of propositions')!

More interesting is Culler's discussion of what he calls 'the most ordinary use of the word *theory*', which seems on first glance to be fairly close to what Hanfling calls the 'diluted sense'. However, it is not identical to that, because, on Culler's account, the word in its most ordinary sense *does* mean something more than 'view' or 'opinion'. *What*, exactly, that 'something more' consists in is, however, a little difficult to extract from Culler's account. One thing is clear: a 'theory', on Culler's understanding, is *always* speculative, whereas views and opinions are merely sometimes so. Culler's discussion of the difference between a theory and a guess suggests another aspect in which a theory might differ from a mere view, but at this point his discussion gets rather muddled. Two interpretations of what he says suggest themselves: 1. if I use the word 'guess', I am suggesting that there is a correct answer to the question under discussion, but I don't happen to know it, whereas if I use the word 'theory' I am leaving open the question of whether there is or is not such a correct answer, and 2. if I use the word 'guess' I am implying that the truth of the matter, though I do not know it, can be fairly easy to establish, whereas if I use the word 'theory' I imply that the truth of the matter 'might be hard to demonstrate'. Clearly, 1 and 2 are not equivalent; 2 is concerned with whether the answer to a question is easy, difficult or impossible to demonstrate; 1 is concerned with whether there *is* an answer.

The way Culler understands the word 'theory' is further muddled by his remark that the speculation about Laura and Michael, if it is a theory and not a guess, 'might not be affected by what Mary says', whereas the truth or falsity of a guess might be settled by Mary's information. I am puzzled by this. If what Mary says can be relied upon, then it would seem to me to settle the question, whether what we were discussing was a theory or a guess. And, if it cannot, then it no more settles a guess than a theory. Does Culler think that in 'its most ordinary use' the word 'theory' means a speculation that is immune to verification of any sort?

In his further elaborations, Culler puts more distance between his sense of 'theory' (or what he claims to be its most ordinary sense) and a mere 'view':

'My theory is that . . . ' also claims to offer an explanation that is not obvious. We don't expect the speaker to continue, 'My theory is that it's because Michael was having an affair with Samantha'. That wouldn't count as a theory. It hardly requires theoretical acumen to conclude that if Michael and Samantha were having an affair, that might have had some bearing on Laura's attitude toward Michael. Interestingly, if the speaker were to say, 'My theory is that Michael was having an affair with Samantha,' suddenly the existence of this affair becomes a matter of conjecture, no longer certain, and thus a possible theory. But generally, to count as a theory, not only must an explanation not be obvious; it should involve a certain complexity: 'My theory is that Laura was always secretly in love with her father and that Michael could never succeed in becoming the right person.' A theory must be more than a hypothesis: it

can't be obvious; it involves complex relations of a systematic kind among a number of factors; and it is not easily confirmed or disproved. If we bear these factors in mind, it becomes easier to understand what goes by the name of 'theory'.

So much for the 'most ordinary sense' of the word 'theory', which, to my eyes at least, no longer looks very ordinary, requiring as it does (a) speculation, (b) epistemological uncertainty about whether the truth of the matter at hand is knowable or not *or* doubt about whether there *is* a truth of the matter, (c) theoretical acumen and (d) the absence of a testable hypothesis. In many ways, then, what Culler regards as the ordinary sense of the word 'theory' is not only not identical with 'theory' as understood by Wittgenstein, it is the exact opposite (for Wittgenstein, a testable hypothesis, allowing the construction of a crucial experiment, was definitional of the concept of theory).

About the more specialist sense in which it is used in literary and cultural studies, Culler makes the following four points:

1. Theory is interdisciplinary - discourse with effects outside an original discipline.
2. Theory is analytical and speculative - an attempt to work out what is involved in what we call sex or language or writing or meaning or the subject.
3. Theory is a critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural.
4. Theory is reflexive, thinking about thinking, enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things, in literature and in other discursive practices.

This is indeed a rather specialised use of the word.

*Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed* by Mary Klages<sup>17</sup> also begins with a chapter called 'What is Literary Theory?', but her answer is different again to Jonathan Culler's. 'We all', she says, 'have assumptions about what makes literature 'literature'. These assumptions, whatever they might be, constitute our theories about what literature is, what it does and why it is important'(p3):

In this sense 'literary theory' isn't something you learn, it's something you become aware of. You already have a theory, or several theories, about literature, but you may never have thought about them or articulated them (p3).

The idea that a theory, in this case of literature, is something we have without realising that we have it, introduces, it seems to me, a radically new sense of the word. Curiously, despite coming from the same region of academic life as Jonathan Culler's definition of theory, it seems *especially* hard to reconcile with his use of the word, in either its 'most ordinary sense' or its more specialised sense. We surely cannot demonstrate 'theoretical acumen' through an assumption that we have never uttered and may not even know

17. Mary Klages, *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London, Continuum, 2005.

that we held, and neither does it seem possible to criticise common sense, to engage in ‘thinking about thinking’, by such mute and unconscious means. So, whatever the ‘theory’ is that Klages claims we already have without knowing it, it is not theory as defined by Culler, nor is theory as defined by Knapp and Michaels, Allen and Turvey, Hanfling or Wittgenstein.

It should, I think, be clear that among the extraordinary variety of uses of the word ‘theory’ so far discussed, there is *nothing* common to them all. Taking a leaf out of Hanfling’s book, we could take Wittgenstein’s famous statement about the multiplicity of things we call ‘games’ and replace the word ‘game’ with the word ‘theory’ and, in answer to the question, ‘what is common to all the things we call ‘theories’?’, reply:

Don’t say: ‘There *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘theories’ - but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. - For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.

(*Philosophical Investigations* §66, with the word ‘theories’ substituted for the word ‘games’)

So, am I now prepared to abandon my earlier claim that biography is fundamentally non-theoretical? Must I not now admit that, if, among some group of people, there is an accepted usage of the word ‘theory’ according to which it is acceptable and even commonplace to talk of a ‘theory of biography’ or to see a biography itself *as* a theory, then I have no grounds to object to such talk?

Well, I think it means that I at the very least have to be careful how I *couch* my objection. Such an objection cannot, I now think, take the form of an assertion, such as: ‘Biographies are *not* theories, neither do they ‘embody’ theories, neither is there anything to be gained from a theory *of* them’. Rather, I think, it has to take the form of a *suggestion*.

In 1917, the British Army issued a directive to its medical officers to stop using the term ‘shell shock’ when diagnosing soldiers who seemed unfit for further service. The reason for this was that the term had become *so* widely and diversely used that it was no longer useful in determining the state of the soldier so diagnosed. For the term had come to be used to describe, among many other things: 1. a soldier so deeply traumatised that he had become severely mentally ill, could play no further part in the war and needed to be committed to an asylum; 2. a soldier whose nervous condition was such that he needed to be sent home for a relatively short period of convalescence before returning to the front; and 3. a soldier, worn out by fighting and the noise of shelling, who needed to be taken out of the frontline and rested behind the lines for a week or two. The Army was also convinced the vagueness of the term was also allowing it to be misused for the benefit of perfectly healthy malingerers who simply wanted to get away from the frontline.

It seems to me that we have reached an analogous position with regard

to the word 'theory'. In academic writing especially, the word has so many different meanings that its use masks more than it reveals, muddies more than it clarifies. So, it would be dogmatic to say of anyone who speaks of a 'theory of biography' that they are using the word 'theory' incorrectly. But, it seems to me, it would be perfectly appropriate to say that, if the word 'theory' means what it means in science, then it is misleading (at the very least) to speak of a 'theory of biography', and, if it is not used in its scientific sense, then, like the term 'shell shock', there are so many things it *could* mean that its use is best avoided. For similar reasons, if we want to grasp what Wittgenstein meant by the 'understanding that consists in seeing connections' and why biography is a good example of it, we would do better - without accusing anybody of misusing the word - to keep 'theory' out of it.