

BOOK REVIEWS

Wittgenstein on Thought and Will by Roger Teichmann (1)

Rachael Wiseman

By chance, NWR received two reviews of the same work, by Rachael Wiseman and Duncan Richter respectively. Both texts are enlightening in themselves, but the editors found that put together, they constitute an even more interesting read. Hence, both are published here, together. The authors were not allowed to see each other's reviews.

Teichmann, Roger, *Wittgenstein on Thought and Will*. New York/Oxford: Routledge, 2015. 180 pages.

This is a charming and lively book. It sustains the balance of wit, absurdity and seriousness that pervades Wittgenstein's later thought and characterises the work of his more sensitive interpreters. Teichmann has a knack for presenting pleasingly everyday scenes, and then rendering them surreal under the light of philosophical scrutiny. "Just as I cannot doubt that I am thinking, so I cannot doubt that it is cheese I am thinking of, if indeed it *is* cheese I am thinking of" – with this Teichmann exposes the oddity in the Lockean empiricists' account of experience (p. 12). Later, Teichmann illuminates the concept of understanding by considering whether you could be said to understand classroom etiquette "if your habit was to put up your hand in the classroom situation and when given the floor ... sing the national anthem" (p. 76). This book will frustrate those who are hoping for a domesticated and systematised version of the later Wittgenstein, or who are hoping for answers to the myriad of rhetorical questions posed in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Teichmann remarks: "rhetorical questions in philosophy [are rarely] *merely* rhetorical" (p. 68) – but whatever it is that a rhetorical question has in addition to rhetoric it is not, in Teichmann's hands, a genuine enquiry deserving a straight answer.

This book does not provide a straight answer to the question 'What is Wittgenstein's account of thought and will?' but instead contains a journey through Wittgenstein's writing – especially his later writing

but with brief forays into the early and middle periods – that is directed and shaped by these two concepts, thought and will. Wittgenstein remarked that “*concepts* lead us to make investigations, are the expression of *our interest*, and direct *our interest*” (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 570). Teichmann shows that the history of Western philosophy is – at least in part – an investigation directed by these twin concepts. The two dualisms that characterise “modern, as opposed to ancient, philosophy” – mind and body, inner and outer – are shown by Teichmann to be interconnected with a third dualism of thought and will (p. 1). This third dualism takes many forms: understanding and will (Descartes); reason and passion (Hume); Idea and Will (Schopenhauer); belief and desire (Davidson); cognitive and conative; factual and evaluative (pp. 1–2). Teichmann’s book reveals in Wittgenstein a gradual unpicking of this third dualism and, through that, of the other two. In this he does us the great service of reminding us how deep Wittgenstein’s challenge to modern thought runs.

Teichmann’s investigation is at once radical and difficult, aiming as it does to show how Wittgenstein undermines the dualisms that comprise our tradition. He invites his reader to start by “leav[ing] ... theories and presuppositions behind” and confronting these concepts with “the same innocence of gaze as that with which Adam and Eve looked upon the trees and the grass” (xi). This is not easy because this tradition is not

an inert observer of the human scene, but an intellectual framework within which we picture ourselves. The result of Teichmann’s Wittgensteinian investigation is satisfying in the way that a punch in the stomach might satisfy one’s desire for an apple: it’s not what one wanted or expected, but it is perhaps what one needs (*Philosophical Remarks*, 64).

Wittgenstein on Thought and Will contains three chapters of exposition bookended by an overview of pre-Wittgenstein philosophical treatments of these concepts (chapter 1) and a discussion of Wittgenstein’s peculiar legacy (chapter 5). Chapter 1 – “The Philosophical Context” – provides an extraordinarily clear and useful overview of Western philosophy’s dealings with thinking and willing and will be useful to student and teacher alike. When the verbs ‘to think’ and ‘to will’ are taken as logically transitive – as grammatically akin to ‘to kick’ or ‘to eat’ – an enquiry into thinking and willing will be concerned with two *relata*: that which does the thinking or willing and that which is the object of thought or will. The question ‘what is the object of thought or will?’ when viewed through this relational lens, affords three category of answer: the objects are items in the world; the objects are items in the mind; the objects are abstract entities. The second and third answer will introduce a subsidiary question: what is the relation between those objects and the things in the world that they are ideas of. With great efficiency Teichmann presents the dominant history of Western

philosophical thinking about thought and action – Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Frege and Russell – through this helpful frame. (This discussion surely owes much to Anscombe’s “The Intentionality of Sensation”, discussed in Teichmann 2008.)

To treat ‘to think’ and ‘to will’ as transitive verbs is to treat the relation between that which thinks and wills and that which is thought of and willed as an external relation. So this grammatical assumption goes hand-in-hand with modern causal parsimony and contemporary scientism; both themes treated of in chapter 1 and returned to in chapter 5. It is also, as Teichmann opens his book by pointing out, to endorse “a picture of Man, as at once passive (acted upon by the world) and active (acting upon the world)” (p. 2). This ‘picture’, Teichmann reminds us, is not a picture of “the whole human person” but really only a picture of Mind (p. 2 and pp. 120–1). Candace Vogler has recently written of the “‘big head’ schematic of intentional action” in a similar vein (Vogler 2002, p. 45).

Among Teichmann’s central points is that by bringing the “whole human person”, the “living human being” (p. 122) back into the centre of philosophy the dualism of thought and will ceases to be plausible, along with the dualisms of mind and body, inner and outer. Here Teichmann is stressing Wittgenstein’s “kinship with Aristotle” – a theme that once again underlines Teichmann’s harmony with Anscombe (p. 122).

Where the contours of chapter 1 are remarkably clear, firm lines break down in the book’s central chapters, “Thought, Will and World”, “The Inner and the Outer”, “The Subject: Grammar vs. Metaphysics”. These chapters are, broadly speaking, concerned to demonstrate the ways in which Wittgenstein’s method of looking and describing fatally undermines the three dualisms that characterise modern philosophy. The method reinstates the “living human being” as the subject of philosophy, and shows her to be a creature whose activities include thinking and willing, and whose language, society and community are the background against which such activities can be observed and understood. It must be part of Teichmann’s view that the breaking down of these dualisms, and the rejection of the relational account of thought and will go hand-in-hand, and so too that the twin concepts that are his topic are not, after all, represented by transitive verbs. However, Teichmann refrains from spelling this out to his reader. I don’t think that Teichmann is a quietist, and I am not sure that his commitment to respecting the spirit of Wittgenstein’s later thought ought to preclude him from making this explicit. If the claim is – as it must be – that one way to end the ‘dead end’ philosophy that follows once the framework described in chapter 1 is endorsed, is to look at the character of the concepts of thought and will, it is surely legitimate to say what that examination has revealed.

Instead of an orderly reframing, the reader is treated to an invigorating

tour through Wittgenstein's later thought, the direction of investigation seeming to be set as one goes along in a way that is reminiscent of the *Blue Book's* momentum. There is a tremendous amount to enjoy from and learn in these chapters, but it is difficult not to yearn for a little more narrative. I was particularly interested in Teichmann's discussions of *formal concepts* in the *Tractatus* (chapter 2) and I expected this theme to be picked up again: after all, Anscombe characterises intention, thought and sensation as formal concepts, an insight she connects with the rejection of the family of views Teichmann outlines in chapter 1. But there is no return. That the concepts of thought and will allow such a wide-ranging exploration of Wittgenstein's later work further supports Teichmann's contention that these concepts are at the heart of the mythic picture that Wittgenstein seeks to deconstruct: internal relations, assertion, sensation, privacy, criteria, emotion, certainty, self, 'I' are all illuminatingly discussed. I should say that Teichmann has insightful and fresh things to say on all these topics.

Though the singularity of Teichmann's framing is obvious, the distinctiveness of the reading of Wittgenstein developed in this book is somewhat occluded. This is largely because he resists locating his discussion in relation to that of other interpreters – even in the footnotes. Defining interpretative schisms are not mentioned and the (perhaps) central dispute among Wittgensteinian scholars – how to under-

stand the relation between the early and later work – is not so much as raised, even though Teichmann's book speaks directly to it. The only commentator with whom Teichmann engages at length is Peter Hacker. The appearance of Hacker alone, a Wittgensteinian giant but one whose interpretative dominance is long past, only serves to underline the absence of any other (living) scholars.

The final chapter takes a wide view of the legacy of Wittgenstein. Under the auspices of diagnosing the ambiguity of that legacy Teichmann presents a two-pronged critique of post-Wittgenstein "English-speaking philosophy" (p. 126). Teichmann says, first, that philosophers have not dealt well with Wittgenstein's therapeutic stance, hearing his diagnosis of 'nonsense' as an attempt to belittle philosophy's seriousness. Teichmann quite rightly insists that Wittgenstein meant no such thing. It is those located on the "barren heights of cleverness" who would rather engage in "technical tinkering" than risk saying anything foolish that are guilty of denigrating the discipline. The philosophers who, like Wittgenstein, traverse the "valleys of silliness" in search of important but homespun truths reveal a genuine commitment serious thought (p. 127). Second, the prevalence of scientism in philosophy – connected by Teichmann to "the status of science in our (especially Western) culture" – has trapped philosophers of mind into searching for a "hoped-for combination of causal and normative explanation" (p. 132). That search, as Teichmann's

book demonstrates, is utterly hopeless if Wittgenstein is even half-way right.

In his preface Teichmann expresses the hope that his book will “give encouragement to students” who “find themselves in the position of the naughty child who has to read his or her favourite book under the bedclothes at night” (xiii). The difficulty of finding a voice in contemporary philosophy while acknowledging and endorsing even the most vanilla version of the later Wittgenstein is one that can dishearten an undergraduate and permanently exclude a graduate student from the possibility of employment. As such, a work that shows the ways in which engagement with the mainstream remains possible and relevant is most welcome. I can’t help but feel that Teichmann’s commitment to displaying the *multi-faceted* character of Wittgenstein’s critique of the picture of Man as Mind, while underplaying the extent to which those facets can be gathered together to form – something like – an *alternative picture* might be something like a strategic error. Teichmann’s book contains the contours of that alternative picture, and a student who can discern it and internalise it would be well placed to take on her scientific peers.

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References

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