

Wittgenstein on Philosophy, Objectivity, and Meaning

James Conant and Sebastian Sunday (eds.)

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This volume of new essays, edited by James Conant and Sebastian Sunday, contains noteworthy contributions to our understanding of Wittgenstein's work and its relation to contemporary philosophy. Some of the metaphilosophical material, for instance, is exceptional and, apart from maybe a couple of less successful pieces (notably on the philosophy of language), most of the twelve chapters are very much worth reading. The opening and closing ones (Alexander George's "Anatomy of a Muddle: Wittgenstein and Philosophy" and Conant's "Some Socratic Aspects of Wittgenstein's Conception of Philosophy"), in particular, offer some of the most illuminating discussions of the nature of Wittgensteinian philosophy currently

available, and are alone worth the price of the paperback edition that has just come out.

The main purpose of this review will be to discuss, rather briefly, the following passage from the editors' preface, in which they sum up the book's overarching aim:

[N]owadays, Wittgenstein scholarship – that is, the historical study of the philosopher and his philosophy – continues to thrive, while Wittgensteinian philosophy – that is, both Wittgenstein's philosophy itself and philosophy practiced in the same manner – is increasingly perceived by many philosophers as being, at best, at the periphery of current concerns and debates. Wittgenstein's influ-

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ence on the analytic tradition was particularly strong, but analytic philosophers are evidently finding it increasingly difficult to see the relevance of much of Wittgenstein's work for contemporary analytic philosophy. This volume strives to repair this recent disconnection of the analytic tradition from one of its founding figures by analysing Wittgensteinian methods and points of view both from an exegetical perspective and with a view to the contemporary significance of Wittgenstein's philosophy. (p. x)

On the one hand, it should be clear that such a disconnection is part of a much more general one, central to how academic philosophy is organized today: the now widely accepted division of labour between the history of philosophy, akin to humanistic disciplines such as history or classics, and philosophy proper, a problem-solving enterprise largely modelled on the natural or formal sciences. Given that those who pursue the latter tend to focus a lot more on their contemporaries engaged in the latest debates than on past thinkers, it is not surprising that Wittgenstein has become a peripheral figure within today's mainstream analytic circles – but then so has someone like Quine. On the other, however, the scientific impetus to which such a division of labour is internal has been a part of the analytic tradition since its inception, while Wittgenstein can be seen as the founder of an anti-scientific counter-current within that very tradition, his philosophy thus being fundamentally

at odds with the broadly Russellian stream which has meanwhile regained institutional dominance.

Now, just before stating their official aim, Conant and Sunday had begun their preface with a swift discussion of the opening section of the *Investigations*, the so-called Augustinian picture and Wittgenstein's first reactions to it. Crucially, they remark that, when stopping before Augustine's seemingly humdrum words, Wittgenstein

appears to think that there is important philosophical work to be done, although (or, perhaps, because) the relevant type of problem is less well defined than a particular philosophical view or theory; the type of problem that Wittgenstein is interested in appears to lie at a somehow deeper or more general level. (p. x)

This brings out a radical difference between Wittgenstein's approach and that of the majority of today's mainstream analytic philosophers (henceforth referred to as "MAPs"): for the latter, who have already taken the largely unreflected but decisive step in a particular metaphilosophical conjuring trick, the possibility that there might be work to be done at such a deeper level, prior to that in which their conventional disputes take place, is unlikely to be at all in sight.

Before moving forward, an important disclaimer is in order: it may seem as if the MAPs I shall be alluding to are mostly strawmen, and I must admit that such an objection may not be entirely unfair; my use of such

strawmen, however, is above all meant to capture a particular intellectual climate, rather widespread these days, and for that purpose I do not think it is misplaced.

At the beginning of his brilliant essay, George remarks that one of the central features of Wittgensteinian criticism is that “Wittgenstein does not aim to argue for the falsity of a philosophical proposition” (p. 2). And he immediately adds that “[if] one knows *anything* about Wittgenstein’s thought, one knows this” (ibid.; my emphasis). There is thus a sense in which most of today’s MAPs either know *nothing* about his thought or cannot quite see why it might be worthy of consideration. Some may be aware that he instead charges others with uttering nonsense, but then are likely to assume, as George tells us not to do, that he must be some sort of conservative language policeman. The rest of the essay goes on to provide a positive characterization of Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy, i.e., of what it is like to work philosophically at a level deeper than that of particular views or theories. Despite George’s clarity, I am not sure whether most of today’s MAPs are at all in a position to understand such a conception, let alone find something attractive in it. For instance, they may well find themselves experiencing bafflement (or contempt) when confronted with the (very Cavellian) concluding remark that “[it] is not an interesting objection to Wittgenstein, or even an objection at all, to point out that his therapy [...] will not always bring relief” (p. 27).

Conant’s own imaginative piece, inviting the reader to go through an exam on Wittgenstein and Socrates aimed at highlighting (often neglected) affinities between the two philosophers, draws attention to another aspect about which today’s MAPs and Wittgenstein could not be further apart: while the former have come to treat philosophy as if it were above all a job, the latter took it (as did Socrates) as essentially comprising the (inseparable) dimensions of both thinking and living, and so as something that cannot simply be put to rest as soon as one leaves the office. And apart from such a unitary view of philosophy, which is becoming increasingly alien to most MAPs, one can hardly get a hang of Wittgenstein’s thought.

It should nonetheless be clear that “analytic philosophy” does not name anything unified and that a great variety of different currents can be found under such a label. Wittgenstein remains relevant for some of them and there is a potential for reconciliation in others. These are somewhat minoritarian, though, and so I find it hard to see, as things presently stand, how Wittgenstein could regain the influence he once enjoyed among analytic philosophers. Accordingly, I do not think this volume can have much impact in reversing this state of affairs; like similar collections, it will probably appeal mainly to insiders.

This, however, need not be taken as a complaint, for it is far from obvious that the decline of Wittgenstein’s popularity is a bad thing. Doubtless, he has fruitfully inspired, in many dif-

ferent ways, the work of *particular* philosophers, some of which have managed to preserve significant features of his original conception. But the emergence of general (allegedly) Wittgensteinian schools or trends is likely to come at the cost of a radical distortion of that conception – one that has neither a specific set of doctrines nor a generally applicable method to offer. Today’s mainstream analytic philosophy may well be too much akin to Kuhnian normal science to be compatible with Wittgensteinian (or, by the way, Socratic) philosophy, which is inherently revolutionary. But if this is so, then so much the worse for mainstream analytic philosophy.

It is also not obvious that the thriving of Wittgenstein scholarship should be embraced with any particular enthusiasm, especially when conceived as *mere* scholarship, i.e., in a way conforming to the aforementioned division of labour. For sure, such scholarship can be useful, but argua-

bly the finest work on Wittgenstein has been done mostly by people regarded as philosophers in a robust sense. These include major figures of the analytic tradition, engaged in the relevant debates of their time, who took their incursions into the history of philosophy not as a separate task but as internal to their own philosophical thinking. (I have in mind the likes of Elizabeth Anscombe, Hilary Putnam, Stanley Cavell, Barry Stroud, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, and others.) That these historically (and methodologically) self-conscious philosophers, to whom disciplinary boundaries are superfluous and that simultaneously shed light onto both the present and the past, are becoming something of an endangered species is, I think, what we really need to worry about.

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