

Essay Review  
*Kant and Post-Tractarian Wittgenstein:  
Transcendentalism, Idealism, Illusion*  
by Bernhard Ritter

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Bernhard Ritter, *Kant and Post-Tractarian Wittgenstein: Transcendentalism, Idealism, Illusion*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 367 pp.

The title to Ritter's book leaves little to the imagination in terms of its subject matter. The book is indeed about Kant, as well as about post-Tractarian Wittgenstein<sup>1</sup>, and the three words making up the subtitle – transcendentalism, idealism, and illusion – do indeed figure prominently. What *is* left unsettled when just reading the title is what to make of that little connecting word *and*. We all understand more or less how “and” works; as a conjunction, it brings together or combines two or more elements, but that alone leaves open just what *kind* of a combination is in question here, and so *why* our two title figures – Kant and Wittgenstein – are being considered together in one volume. As different possibilities present themselves, the imagination starts to come to life: is the sense of “and” something along the lines of “Kant, *and so* Wittgenstein,” which suggests an exploration of the ways in which Kant's philosophy influenced – or was formative for – Wittgenstein's own? Wittgenstein is surely a post-Kantian philosopher in ways beyond the trivial sense that he came along *later than* Kant. Although there is not much evidence of Wittgenstein being a careful reader of Kant, he did read lots of Schopenhauer in his youth and Schopenhauer framed his work entirely in relation to Kant's three critiques (he considered them required reading, along with his own *Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, before tackling *The World as Will and Representation*). Moreover, Frege looms large in Wittgenstein's philosophical development, especially early on, and he consorted with the

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<sup>1</sup> By “post-Tractarian,” Ritter means all of Wittgenstein's writings following his return to philosophy in the late 1920s. The term thus encompasses both what has come to be known as the “middle” and the “later” Wittgenstein. Accordingly, Ritter's discussion includes attention to everything from the *Blue Book* to *On Certainty*. Only the *Tractatus* and surrounding “early” writings are excluded from his study.

Vienna Circle in the 1920s on his way back into philosophy. Kantian ideas abound here as well. Clearly, there are lines of influence to trace out. Or is the sense more like “Kant, *and then* Wittgenstein,” which suggests not so much influence or appropriation as it does engagement and criticism: Wittgenstein’s philosophical development might here be framed by a concern with Kant but in a manner that seeks an *overcoming* of his critical philosophy. In his Preface, Ritter himself sees the two editions of Peter Hacker’s *Insight and Illusion* as exemplifying each of these two construals of “and.” Ritter’s Preface also makes it clear that his project is not Hacker’s, nor is it primarily concerned to engage and reject either of Hacker’s earlier ways of bringing Kant and Wittgenstein together.

Still in the Preface, Ritter offers a number of remarks about what work “and” is doing for him, as well as what work the connective is *not* doing. While he is in some way concerned with what he refers to as the “development” of Wittgenstein’s philosophy “out of Kantianism,” he is quick to insist that the

idea of a development is here invoked purely heuristically as a means of interpretation: no attempt will be made to establish elements of an actual historical process, or a thesis about a purported direct influence of Kant on Wittgenstein. (p. x)

Ritter’s disclaimer here emphasizes that talk of development is not to be understood as something that happened to Wittgenstein’s thinking understood biographically, as the development of Wittgenstein the thinker via some kind of engagement with Kant’s philosophy. Again, since there is little to suggest that Wittgenstein spent a lot of time or effort reading Kant – as opposed to later philosophers whose work *did* develop at least somewhat in this way – a project devoted to charting such developmental ideas would have little to recommend it. But then what does “development” mean here? What kind of “heuristic” is Ritter proposing? Immediately prior to the disclaimer just cited, he offers the following suggestion: “To know how Wittgenstein’s philosophy could in principle have developed out of Kantianism is to know how they relate to each other” (p. x). It is hard to know what to make of this idea of development. *Developed out of* suggests a series of steps – a set of transformations – whereby one gets from Kantianism to Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Documenting those steps tells us how they are related to one another. What comes to mind here are children’s toys along the lines of Transformers figurines, where what initially is, say, a rocket-powered vehicle can through a series of twists, turns, and clicks be made into a robotic monster.<sup>2</sup> Knowing that series, i.e., knowing how the robot monster develops out of the vehicle (and with such toys, vice-versa), *just is* knowing how they are

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<sup>2</sup> As the tagline for Transformer toy commercials say (or at least used to say back when I paid attention to such things), Transformers are “robots in disguise.”

related to one another. Of course, in the case of such toys, they are built so as to be related by such a series of steps, but given Ritter's disclaimer, no such intentional process is at work with Wittgenstein and Kant: Wittgenstein the philosopher did not twist, turn, and click the various elements and features of Kant's philosophy so as to assemble his view (and the reverse is ruled out *a priori*, to invoke a central Kantian idea). The interpretive claim instead is that *we*, as readers of Kant and Wittgenstein, can find a way to get from the former to the latter, which leads us to expect that Ritter's book will offer that series of steps, the twists, turns, and clicks necessary to get us from Kant to Wittgenstein. That such a project looks even remotely promising suggests at least *some* antecedent affinity between Kant and Wittgenstein. We do not typically compare philosophers – or philosophical views – via such a reconstructive-transformative hermeneutic, i.e., by trying to determine how one “could in principle have developed out of the other” (cf. p. x). Could a similar project be undertaken with, say, Spinoza and Wittgenstein? What series of transformations gets us from absolute monism – God's infinite attributes and their various modes – to the rough ground of *Philosophical Investigations*? Or how about Nietzsche instead of Spinoza: is there an “in principle” sense in which Wittgenstein's philosophy could have developed out of Nietzsche's (perhaps with Nietzsche's slave-revolt in morality prefiguring Wittgenstein's builders)? I take it that the Transformers approach does not look especially promising when it comes to either Spinoza or Nietzsche as the starting point, out of which Wittgenstein might then emerge “in principle.” In their case, a certain picture that Ritter offers in the Preface is appropriate. The picture he describes is that “of a rectangle with a dividing line down the middle, showing Wittgenstein on one side and Kant on the other” (ibid.). That the two are consigned to different boxes emphasizes their working “within different philosophical paradigms” (ibid.). As so divided, there is no ready way of getting from one to the other. While such a picture readily suggests itself when it comes to many pairs of philosophers, Ritter's goal is to show it to be misplaced in the case of Kant and Wittgenstein by “emphasizing ideas in Kant and Wittgenstein that cut across such dividing lines” (ibid.). And because there is no concern with an “actual historical process” or “a purported direct influence,” these lines can be understood as running in *both* directions (ibid.). Although Ritter never suggests a series of steps whereby Kant's philosophy “develops out of” Wittgenstein's work, perhaps, in the manner of Transformers toys, such steps could be documented. Indeed, in some sense, those steps will already have been taken by following out Ritter's interpretive plan: the steps by which we end up at Wittgenstein tell us a lot about what is going on in Kant's original ideas.

The book proper is divided into four parts comprising nineteen chapters (as well as separate introductions for each part). The emphasis shifts considerably across these parts.

The first consists of six chapters that are evenly divided between Wittgenstein and Kant. The first three briskly sketch central ideas in Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian philosophy, including the relation between "grammatical" and "metaphysical" propositions in the first chapter and the authority of Wittgenstein's appeals to "what we can say" in the third. In the second chapter, Ritter brusquely – but correctly, in my view – dismisses readings of Wittgenstein that see him as committed to some form of *linguistic idealism*. The remaining three chapters turn back to central elements of Kant's philosophy: the place of language in Kant's critical philosophy, the idea of transcendental illusion, and the nature of Kant's transcendental idealism. I will say more about these chapters momentarily.

While the first part is evenly divided, the second and third parts are more decidedly lopsided: Part Two, which contains five chapters, is entirely on Kant (with an excursus on Descartes) and Part Three's four chapters are all concerned with (post-Tractarian) Wittgenstein. Even Part Four's four chapters shift between Kant and Wittgenstein until the final chapter promises to bring them more closely together (I will have more to say about this final chapter in due course). Such a division of interpretive labor has the unfortunate tendency to reinforce the two-box picture whose seeming naturalness Ritter hopes to dispel, especially as particular chapters drill down considerably into specific texts and, in Kant's case, the centuries of interpretive controversies that surround them. Among the nineteen chapters, there is an entire chapter devoted to Kant's first Antinomy, another that concerns the fourth A-Paralogism, a third on Kant's Second Analogy, and yet another just on § 26 of the Transcendental Deduction. Attention to such fine-grained details of Kant's critical philosophy suggests some very specific clicks and turns of Kant's system to yield Wittgenstein's philosophy, but I will confess to finding myself emerging from some chapters wondering just why I had been led through such a thicket. A case in point is the sixth chapter, which crucially concerns Kant's transcendental idealism. The chapter is organized around "Jacobi's dilemma," which points to the problems Kant faces in thinking about *appearances* – the representations making up the mind's experience of the world – as *caused*: they cannot be caused by empirical objects (objects in space and time), since Kant is clear that these are themselves nothing but appearances (and so cannot make any antecedent or independent causal contribution); herein lies the first horn of the dilemma. But the causes of appearances cannot be things-in-themselves either, since to think of the latter as *causes* would violate Kant's proscription on any knowledge of things in themselves (causality is, after all, a category that we bring to experience). Commentary and controversy abound in relation to Jacobi's dilemma, both to make sense of what Kant is up to and, for those

otherwise drawn to Kant's critical philosophy, to try to rescue an attractive or even compelling, understanding of his transcendental idealism. Over the course of the chapter, Ritter leads us through metaphysical and methodological variants on "two aspects" interpretations of Kant, including their more moderate and robust versions, only to be told at the end of the chapter that the metaphysical variant will be "set aside," while also noting that the methodological version that will be assumed in subsequent chapters "has been found 'anodyne' and 'deflationary' by the commentators we are about to leave" such that "this stage might not be a fully stable one" (p. 85). How *these* twists, clicks, and turns are meant to be illuminating for Wittgenstein is apt to feel more than a little mysterious.

What *does* become apparent in Ritter's documenting of these details and difficulties of Kant's philosophy is the kind of challenge his developmental account faces, as we need to have a clear sense of both the *from* and the *to*. That is, we need to be clear about the Kantian ideas that serve as our starting point (just which kind of rocket-powered vehicle we are going to transform) as well as the Wittgensteinian position that serves as our endpoint (the robot monster to be set loose upon the philosophical world). An overly metaphysical understanding of Kant's transcendental idealism, for example, would diminish the prospects for the emergence of Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian ideas from it, as the affinities would be either too faint to discern or lacking altogether. To invoke perhaps a bit prematurely the title of Ritter's final chapter, the project depends upon – and also is meant to yield – a more "Viennese Kant" and a more "Prussian Wittgenstein." These labels are especially evident not just in Ritter's efforts to present a less metaphysical version of Kant's transcendental idealism, but a less *mentalist* version as well: the fourth chapter of Part One concerns the place of language and communicability in Kant's philosophy, which argues for a fundamental "expressibility condition" at work in Kant's conception of thought. This corrective "speaks against placing him in a mentalist tradition, as most Wittgenstein-inspired critics are intent on doing" (p. 52). But the distance between Kant and Wittgenstein is diminished not just by moving Kant closer to Wittgenstein, but, in keeping with Ritter's mixing and matching of the Viennese and Prussian modifiers, moving Wittgenstein closer to Kant as well. One way in which Ritter does so is by tracing out what we might call transcendental tendencies in Wittgenstein. Ritter sees more than a little "transcendental residue" in the anti-skeptical stance of *On Certainty*, for example. While we do not find there anything like a full-blown transcendental argument, Wittgenstein can nonetheless be read as questioning the kind of conditions the skeptic sees as operative in experience that allow her to derive her seemingly devastating conclusions:

The point is not that our epistemic practice with experiential propositions *cannot* depend on the possibility of generally excluding experiential illusions, but rather that the idea of something that would still be *human* experience and have such a thing as its basis has not been made intelligible. (p. 252)

Ritter's discussion of *On Certainty* appears quite late in the book – Chapter 15 – and so might be understood as a kind of finishing twist in the construction of our Prussian Wittgenstein Robot®, a turn that snaps the last piece in place. The more significant constructive work has thus already happened. The core around which these peripheral parts click into place are the sections in *The Critique of Pure Reason* that Kant labels a “Refutation of Idealism.” The idealism in question is the “empirical” or “problematic” variety, in contrast to Kant's favored transcendental version. The rough idea behind Kant's refutation is demonstrating to the would-be empirical idealist – a philosopher such as Berkeley – that his picture of the mind and its inventory of “sensible ideas” (or impressions, representations, or what have you) is not freestanding, i.e., that it depends essentially on things “without the mind.” As Ritter puts it,

the Refutation is an attempt to show that there are *no purely subjective mental states*, thus depriving the idealist of an independent basis for the formulation of the problem about the existence of objects in space in the first place. (p. 88)

What particularly interests Ritter is just what Kant's Refutation provides in terms of the relation between “inner” experience and “outer” objects. Should Kant be understood here as *using* the idealist's picture of the mind and its inventory, whose status can be vouchsafed via Cartesian reasoning, as a *basis* to prove the existence of objects outside of the mind, thereby providing a refutation of skepticism as well? As Ritter sees it, this way of construing what Kant is up to concedes too much to the would-be empirical idealist, as it treats that picture of the mind as populated by freestanding “ideas” as, we might say, *intelligible enough* to serve as a point of departure for some kind of proof. According to Ritter, “what really happens in the Refutation [...] is that a certain picture of our sensible relationship to things in the world is repudiated” (p. 88). In repudiating “a certain picture,” the argument should not be understood as promising a proof (although Kant appears to make such promises)<sup>3</sup> of one thing starting from another, since our whole way of thinking about the two is being reconfigured (dare we say *transformed*?):

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<sup>3</sup> Central here is Kant's famous remark regarding the “scandal of philosophy” that “the existence of things outside of us [...] must be accepted merely on *faith*” (Kant 1965: 34/B xl). Kant thus laments the absence of “any satisfactory proof.” While the target here is clearly skepticism rather than empirical idealism (Berkeley, after all, offered his brand of idealism to counter the skeptic), Kant's remarks indicate his ambitions in the *Critique* more

For if Kant's argument establishes that inner experience of my own existence in time is simultaneously in part outer, it proves no existence outside me *from* inner experience; it shows that inner experience is really something quite different. The moral Kant should have drawn from the Refutation is that there is no proof of the existence of 'external' objects either, if this is understood in the terms of the idealist. (p. 88)

Thus for Ritter, the Refutation of Idealism, properly understood, "is not meant to prove the existence of material objects in the face of radical scepticism" (p. 88). To read the argument as offering such a proof is already to concede too much to the empirical idealist, to leave in place the Berkeleyan picture of the mind (even though Berkeley himself had no interest in proving the existence of anything beyond the mind, save perhaps for God's mind). In this way, Kant's argument possesses "strong affinities with ideas found in Wittgenstein, especially concerning the experiencing subject in idealism and the relation between 'the inner' and 'the outer'" (p. 89).

Many of the later chapters of Ritter's book are devoted to teasing out these "strong affinities." Particular attention is paid to Wittgenstein's interest in solipsism, starting with the *Blue Book* and continuing on to the "visual room" passages in the *Investigations* (in keeping with Ritter's advertised interest in post-Tractarian Wittgenstein only, he assiduously avoids any discussion of the place of solipsism in his early work). Considerable attention is paid as well to the stretch of remarks in the *Investigations* often referred to as making up his "private language argument." The lessons Ritter extracts from his (admittedly corrective) reading of the Refutation of Idealism are especially pertinent here, as Wittgenstein's target might likewise be understood as a certain *picture* of the mind as populated by, and immediately aware of, object-like "sensations." Ritter applies to this picture the Kantian label "transcendental realism about the mind." Criticizing this picture means criticizing

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generally. Contrary to what Kant often took himself to be doing, Ritter's corrective reading of the Refutation allows only that "we can refute the idealist, but we cannot prove that realism about material objects is correct" (p. 139). It is worth noting here that Ritter's correctives pave the way not just for Wittgenstein, but for Heidegger as well. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger offers a kind of neither-nor alternative to realism and idealism. Heidegger's response to realism and idealism likewise turns on the aspiration to provide some kind of *proof* in response to skeptical challenges. (Contrary to Ritter, Heidegger sees the Refutation of Idealism as part of Kant's attempt to address the scandal of philosophy he decries in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique*.) For Heidegger, "the 'scandal of philosophy' is not that this proof has yet to be given, but that *such proofs are expected and attempted again and again*" (Heidegger 1962: 249/205). Instead, "if Dasein is understood correctly, it defies such proofs, because, in its being, it already *is* what subsequent proofs deem necessary to demonstrate for it" (ibid.). Heidegger's "already *is*" refers to the Dasein's way of being as *being-in-the-world*, which rejects the "cabinet of consciousness" model of the mind shared by skeptics, realists, and idealists alike.

the idea that things ‘in the mind’ are known non-discursively simply in virtue of their immediate presence, and that minds of other people, which can never become ‘present’ to oneself, are therefore subject to scepticism. (p. 290)

Ritter is careful here *not* to see § 258 of the *Investigations* and surrounding passages as demonstrating how a problem concerning the identification of sensations – a problem that points toward a kind of intractable privacy – is somehow solved in “ordinary language.” We should not

think that the problem of identification that emerges in § 258 is somehow solved in our common language by appeal to public criteria. No, in our common language, the problem *does not exist*. (p. 290)

We thus have not so much a problem accompanied by a solution as the *illusion* of a problem (and the illusion of a problem certainly does not require an illusion of a solution).

Having slowly and painstakingly transformed his Viennese Rocket-Powered Kant-Mobile® into a Prussian Wittgenstein Robot Monster® over the course of the preceding eighteen chapters, Ritter sends his robot monster into battle with other Wittgenstein Robot Monsters whose construction has been guided by some concern with idealism. Various other readers of Wittgenstein – Jonathan Lear, Stephen Mulhall, Michael Hymers, and Barry Stroud – are accorded separate sections of the last chapter, while another section (entitled “Nagel and Cerbone”) concerns my critical engagement with Thomas Nagel’s emphatically idealist reading of the later Wittgenstein. (I am pleased to report that *my* Wittgenstein Robot Monster emerges largely unscathed according to Ritter’s review of that battle.) These are not so much battles as tentative skirmishes, from which emerge not just disagreements but points of shared interpretation and concern as well. Among the group, Lear’s and Hymer’s Wittgenstein(s) most closely resemble Ritter’s in that each is derived from an explicitly Kantian archetype, as Lear sees in Wittgenstein deep parallels to Kant’s Transcendental Deduction, while Hymers, like Ritter, looks to the Refutation of Idealism as a way of understanding Wittgenstein’s later remarks on sensation language and privacy. The section on Mulhall examines the affinities and differences between so-called “new” or “resolute” readings of the private language argument and Ritter’s reading of these passages as targeting transcendental realism about the mind. Stroud, finally, is of interest because of his later, more tentative conception of transcendental reasoning, where the goal is to trace out connections and dependences in order to discover thoughts or beliefs that have some kind of “invulnerability” in relation to other things that we think and believe. Such tracings do not constitute *proofs* that these invulnerable thoughts and beliefs are true, but only



that we cannot disbelieve them while continuing to think or believe all of the things that depend upon them.

The book ends on what strikes me as something of a sour note. Casting one last look at *On Certainty*, Ritter notes that the “type of transcendentalism” on offer there

is far from matching the philosophical attractiveness and beauty of the Kantian model. In its lack of systematicity and unclarity about its objective, it rather resembles the state of philosophy which Kant described as a ‘groping about’, rather than that of having entered upon ‘the secure course of a science’ (B vii). (p. 318)

Having so carefully transformed Kant into Wittgenstein, he seems to want only to undo all of his careful twists, clicks, and snaps. But Ritter’s complaints about *On Certainty* strike me as misguided, and for more than one reason. For one thing, it seems unfair to complain about a lack of a clear objective when it comes to *On Certainty*. As an assemblage of notes from the final months of Wittgenstein’s life, it is not even an approximation of a treatise or work. But more seriously, Ritter’s desire for systematicity seems to miss entirely what Wittgenstein Robot Monsters (Prussian or otherwise) *do*. They do not *build* things, nor do they in any way “grope” toward a “science” in their (unsystematic) crisscrossing journeys through philosophical landscapes. Wittgenstein Robots *destroy*, but they do not destroy anything of substance; their rockets, lasers, and mechanical arms are aimed at nothing solid or secure. They smash only the pretensions to science, the illusions of systematicity. Wittgenstein Robots need only the strength to knock down houses of cards and castles in the air, all the many *Luftgebäude* they encounter in their travels. So transformed, there really is no going back.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to David Stern for comments on a previous draft of this review.