

*Ludwig Wittgenstein: Dictating Philosophy.  
To Francis Skinner – The Wittgenstein-Skinner  
Manuscripts* by Arthur Gibson and Niamh  
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Arthur Gibson and Niamh O'Mahony, eds.: *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Dictating Philosophy. To Francis Skinner – The Wittgenstein-Skinner Manuscripts*, Springer: Cham/Switzerland, 2020, xxxii, 469 pp.

The volume under review is a labor of love, and it deserves our interest for a number of different reasons. The book consists of material which was in the possession of Wittgenstein's close friend Francis Skinner, and which, after Skinner's death in 1941, Wittgenstein had sent to Louis Goodstein, a mutual friend. Goodstein replied: "If I find anything of Francis' work sufficiently complete for publication, I shall get in touch with you about it" (p. 396) As it turned out, Goodstein seems never to have undertaken any steps in such a direction, although, in retrospect, the material did contain the most advanced version of the *Brown Book*, as well as a continuation of the *Brown Book* (more on this below). After Goodstein's death the material was eventually passed on to Trinity College in 2002, and after a long editorial process, a large portion of it was published in the

present volume. From Wittgenstein's perspective, the material apparently had only a personal importance, which seems quite natural as by 1941 his work had moved on from the *Blue and Brown Books* to the early (German) versions of the *Philosophical Investigations*. The "Skinner Archive" (for a picture see p. 25), as the editors call the material, is thus a document of what has been called the "Middle Wittgenstein".

The Introduction relates the personal and philosophical circumstances of Wittgenstein and Skinner.

This volume contains 250 pages of philosophical lectures, dictations and writings by Wittgenstein, all of them most probably written between 1933 and 1935, divided into six major sections. Most of the material is related to work on the *Blue Book* and the *Brown Book*. Curiously, from Skinner's handwritten copy of the *Brown Book*

only the first three pages are included, plus a hint about “Remark 28, which has some subtle adjustments in phrasing” (29, n. 85).

Skinner’s name first surfaced in the preface to the first publication of both volumes: “Wittgenstein dictated the *Blue Book* to his class in Cambridge during the session 1933–34, and he had stenciled copies made. He dictated the *Brown Book* to two of his pupils (Francis Skinner and Alice Ambrose) during 1934–35.” (BB, Preface, p. vii, Rush Rhees, March 1958). Rhees calls the *Blue Book* “a set of notes”; we now learn how much work went into the making of that “set of notes”, even if Wittgenstein would have agreed with Rhees in his assessment of the final result.

In Brian McGuinness’ wonderful volume of letters and documents *Wittgenstein in Cambridge* (2008, pp. 219–220) we learn some details about the dictation of the *Blue Book*, at a time when Wittgenstein was, according to a letter from Ambrose “in a snag with his book” (the manuscript later published as *Philosophical Grammar*), and about the process of producing copies. This new volume offers an abundance of material showing Wittgenstein, and his students, and especially Skinner, at work. First of all, we get a list of dates, included in a copy handwritten by Skinner, which shows that the first part of the *Blue Book* was dictated between Nov. 8 and Dec. 9, 1933, and between Jan. 19 and Jan 24, 1934. (This copy, however, is not part

of the Skinner archive but belongs to Nedo’s Wittgenstein Archive, p. 423). The Skinner Archive shows how much work by Wittgenstein himself, and by others, went into producing a book-like presentation of his thoughts in English, a presentation which was, in the end, abandoned in favor of a German version prepared by Wittgenstein himself from his manuscripts.

The editors’ introduction, as well as some of the appendices, provide information about Skinner’s family as well as his life and death. The editors also try to assess the role Skinner played in the process documented by these texts, all of which are in Skinner’s handwriting.

The edition includes six texts plus several additional documents.

The first text is called, by the editors, “The Pink Book”. It includes entries dated between November and December 1933, and discusses matters similar to the *Blue Book*:<sup>1</sup> The notion of a family of language games is introduced; Augustine’s account of learning language (with “bricks, arches, cylinders” in place of “cube, brick, slab, column”) serves as a starting-point (pp. 107–110, cf. *Brown Book*, p. 77), we meet the notorious French politician (127), and the notion of a “proposition” as contrasted to a “sentence” (138, cf. BB 32). The notion of thinking “in the head” is also discussed, including the observation that if someone were to read in a newspaper that a pen was found

<sup>1</sup>The editors’ comments do not include cross-references to the *Brown Book*. As such comparisons seem useful, some references are included here for the benefit of readers.

inside somebody's head, she might know what this would look like, while upon reading that "they have found the thought in the head", no such picture emerges ("you can't draw a picture of this" (137)). The "Pink Book" may thus fairly be called a preliminary draft for the *Blue Book*, even though the exact nature of the relation of both texts is not entirely clear. For example, in the opening remark about Schopenhauer's view that if one had to read his book twice in order to understand it, this actually *should* distinguish philosophy from science; the "not" on p.103 is most likely a slip.

The second section in the volume is a sequence of numbered examples discussing the problems of private experience and ways of communicating them. This seems to be a planned extension of the *Brown Book*. This text has parallels in some notebooks (Ms 148–149). This material on solipsism has for a long time and repeatedly attracted attention: In 1968 Rush Rhees published excerpts from the notebooks, and a full version prepared by David Stern was included in the volume *Philosophical Occasions* (1993, pp. 202–288). This new material shows some overlap to pp. 213–214, including the numbering of the examples. The item seems to be a reworked version of part of the notebook sequence. This text applies the language-game method to the problem of private sensations and private language, especially discussing the case of a person thought to have inverted red and green sensations. The examples try to lead the notion that we may

have private sensations back to the rough ground of concrete examples. It is an exercise not in giving clear-cut simple examples of how language works, but rather in doing away with a series of temptations to say things like "certainly he can't be in doubt about what his visual impression is as he is having it." (p. 167) The text also discusses the possibility of privately "giving a name to an impression" (p. 179). The text can thus be regarded as Wittgenstein's first attempt to deal with the issue of solipsism by showing that from the point of view of describing language-games, the solipsistic view simply dissolves because all attempts to actually describe the use of solipsistic expressions fail. (This might be seen as a decisive step away from the notion that all of our language can, or even must, just as well be described in solipsistic terms.)

The third item consists of notes from a lecture course, titled "Philosophy", running from Jan. 17 to Feb. 23, 1934. This course ran parallel to the ongoing dictation of the *Blue Book*. Wittgenstein discusses mainly problems connected with such words as "understanding", "expectation", and here we encounter familiar examples like "Bright's Disease" (p. 193, BB 21), Augustine on time and Socrates on knowledge (p. 209, BB 26), the "shadow of a fact" (p. 215, BB 39), the grocer example, only with bananas in place of the usual apples (p. 238, BB 16), the trisection of an angle (p. 241, BB 41), and how to "despise" unconsciously (p. 203, BB 30). There are, however also some interesting

additional examples like Spengler's redefinition of the term "Prussian" (not "Prussian Blue", as in BB 4), and Bismarck who lied by telling the exact truth to people who were convinced that he was about to tell a lie (p. 222), as well as the cryptic allusion: "A philosopher of the 18th century asked the question: Could I ever try to dance like this person" (p. 220). Perhaps these last cases did not make it into the Blue Book because they were too outlandish.

The brief fourth item again has parallels in the Blue Book: We meet the water diviner (p. 243, BB 10), Hardy believing Goldbach's Theorem (p. 243, BB 11), estimating the height of a building (p. 244, BB 11), and the yellow patch (p. 245, BB 12), but mainly the question of how the teaching of a rule is involved in using it (cf. BB 14), including the matter of an "infinite chain of reasons" (p. 253, BB 15). We also encounter the example, "How did you get to Grantchester?" (p. 247), reminding us of the corresponding passage in *the Lecture on Ethics*. In one case we meet an illustration absent from the *Blue Book* version: To give the rules of chess we could draw a chart, showing the shape of the pieces in one column and the permissible moves of these pieces in a parallel column. Probably through some misunderstanding the table given has the Greek letter  $\xi$  in place of the drawing of the Knight, and a L-shaped figure (turned 90° counter-clockwise) next to it, where the moves of a Knight on the board should appear (p. 247).

The fifth item is called 'The Norwegian Notebook (it carries a nice Norwegian scene on the cover). This is possibly the most surprising piece of the collection. It seems to be written in a phenomenological spirit: One specific object is given to us and then we are invited to draw and describe it in detail:

I see a towel hanging on the wall from a nail with folds, curves, shades of light and dark. I draw a very exact picture of this towel. With this picture I show other people how the towel looked when it was hanging on the wall. I use this picture to hang a towel of the same size and shape, as indicated by the picture, and under the same lighting conditions, again in the same position on the wall. Here I will have reproduced the same set of circumstances as indicated in the picture. The picture enabled me to keep a record of a certain set of circumstances involved in the towel hanging on the wall. It is important also to remember the circumstances under which the picture was painted; I sat before the towel constantly looking at it, drawing with a pencil on a piece of paper before me, rubbing out lines, painting, mixing colours, a process taking time and involving lots of different activities. Also when I start to draw the towel, I don't already have in mind all the different things I will do: I may have a general idea of what I will do, but most

of the things I do will be brought about by what happens while I am doing the drawing.

What then do I refer to by a certain set of circumstances involved in the towel hanging on the wall and in what way is the picture a record of it? One thing I might say would be the visual spatial shape of the towel. But by saying this I have so far said very little. (p. 255)

Wittgenstein, however, does not try to give a complete description, but only goes on to describe how philosophically dubious vocabulary comes to our minds when we start to reason about such a situation:

Certain words come into my mind which do not satisfy me. If I look up to the sky and try to think of the right words to describe its colour, I think of blue, then light blue, then a pale light blue, then perhaps an ethereal transparent light blue. (p. 260)

Wittgenstein also gives a personal (“Norwegian”) example of describing a color-phenomenon: “(red, dark red, burning dark crimson red, looking at the Northern light)” (p. 260). The text then leaves the towel behind and goes on to discuss examples of two samples of cloth which looked alike in a shop but turned out to be different in daylight (a case similar to Sellars’ famous example) and goes on to stress that this still does not entail that any color-impression must be “private” (pp. 264-5).

The sixth and final text reproduces a lecture course (from Feb. to April 1935) mainly dedicated to questions of logic and mathematics. A different, but much shorter version of this /was edited by Alice Ambrose in 1979 (Wittgenstein’s Lectures. Cambridge, 1932–1935, pp. 135-163), and there also exist unpublished notes by Margaret Macdonald (p. 269, editorial note). Wittgenstein explains the criterion for a proposition belonging to logic (p. 270), and goes on to illustrate his view by referring to his truth-table notation (p. 271), and his ab-notation (familiar from TLP 6.1203), the relation between “inference, implication and tautology” (p. 278), mistakes in his own earlier view of generality (p. 284), the notion of a proposition (p. 290), of identity (p. 303) and, very extensively the definition of numbers through correlating them (p. 306), and rules (p. 321).

The edition has some imperfections: On p. 273 the first diagram for “ $p \vee q$ ” has the German *W* and *F* (for *wahr* and *falsch*) instead of *T* and *F*. The one *F* indicating the case of both propositions being “*falsch*” is erroneously included in the next line of text (although n. 16 explicitly mentions the line connecting that *F* to the diagram). On the preceding page there also seems to be a slip in “ $(p, q)[F.TTT]$ ”. According to Tractatus notation this should presumably read: “ $(p, q)[TTTF]$ ”. On pp. 275–276 other formulas seem somewhat garbled.

Appendix [K] reproduces a letter from Ambrose to Rhees (written in 1977) concerning the editing of these

lectures, where Ambrose considers deleting the passages where Wittgenstein seems only to repeat *Tractatus* material (p. 415), a plan that fortunately was not carried out. Another letter from Ambrose to Moore contains her opinion “that it is better for a young person not to become a disciple of Wittgenstein”, and: “I told Wittgenstein that he used his power over people to extract worship” (p. 377).

We also get twelve pages from the much-rumored “Yellow Book”, or at least a version of it. It again contains a discussion of idealism and solipsism, with some overlap in the *Blue Book*, pp. 50-70. Here we meet Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (p. 392, BB 62), a critical remark about Descartes (p. 395, BB 69), but also the discussion of the basic idea of homeopathy: “A cure should be of the same nature as the illness” vs. “The cure should be of the opposite nature as the illness” (p. 392). Some passages include remarks such as “when W. gave an example...” (p. 394), suggesting that the account may not be entirely verbatim.

Another appendix contains facsimiles of three pages of Skinner’s version of *the Brown Book*, with some re-phrasings in Wittgenstein’s hand (pp. 420-422). This suggests that the version of the *Brown Book* as printed in 1958 may not

be the final version Wittgenstein (and Skinner) produced.

There is also a chapter consisting entirely of arithmetical calculations. Its purpose remains uncertain, although the editors suggest some relation to Fermat’s Theorem (p. 370).

The volume is very carefully edited, and all corrections and changes in the text are described in detail. These descriptions show the enormous amount of work that went into their making. The editors carefully highlight the places where the edition contains new material. It should be added that the presentation of material already published in slightly different form is very welcome, as it foregrounds painstaking way Wittgenstein (with Skinner’s help) worked on the expression of his thoughts.

All in all, this is a volume which gives Francis Skinner his rightful place in the larger context of Wittgenstein’s work and life. It will possibly be disappointing to readers who seek philosophical novelty only, but it will be valuable to every serious student interested not just in the final expression of Wittgenstein’s philosophy but in following him at work—especially specially as, given the nature of his writing, he did most of such fine-tuning in German.

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