

Wittgenstein's Philosophy in 1929, edited by Florian Franken Figueiredo

Joachim Schulte

Wittgenstein's Philosophy in 1929, ed. Florian Franken Figueiredo. New York: Routledge, 2023. 230 pp.

Historians sometimes avail themselves of expressions like “the long nineteenth century” to mean, for example, the period between the French Revolution and World War One. In an analogous way one might speak of a “long” year 1929 to describe the period during which Wittgenstein worked on his writings between his return to Cambridge in January 1929 and his dictation of TS 208 (March / April 1930) covering the same ground as that discussed in his MSS 105-108 (up to p. 133). The essential background of Wittgenstein’s writings during this period is ably summarised by Andrew Lugg in his Introduction to this volume edited by Florian Franken Figueiredo. No doubt Lugg is right in saying (p. 4) that Wittgenstein was neither a metaphysician nor a naturalistic philosopher, “but from beginning to end, he was occupied with the logic of our language”.

Readers of Wittgenstein’s manuscripts from this period will notice that much of this material is dedicated to discussions of what is generally regarded as questions in the philosophy of mathematics, in particular questions concerning intuitionism. What

he knew about intuitionism came from attending a lecture Brouwer had given in Vienna in 1928 and from discussions with Ramsey. But he was also familiar with works by Hermann Weyl and other authors. Now (in “Wittgenstein’s Struggle with Intuitionism”) Mathieu Marion and Mitsuhiro Okada warn against trying to read Wittgenstein’s writings from the (long) year 1929 as products of merely “transitional” efforts. What they recommend is an approach that takes Wittgenstein’s remarks as moves in a game constituted by the *Grundlagenstreit* between positions like formalism, intuitionism, and logicism. As the authors point out, in characterising intuitionism Wittgenstein does not always do justice to Brouwer’s (or Weyl’s, or Heyting’s) claims. On the other hand, in defending the idea of what Marion and Okada call the “priority of mathematics over logic” Wittgenstein himself advances arguments that can be seen to come quite close to a view held by Brouwer. For Wittgenstein, the central idea goes back to the *Tractatus*, which (as Marion and Okada point out) offers a “logic-free” account that is in agree-

ment with Wittgenstein's early conception of equations as *Scheinsätze* (pseudo-propositions). Another important notion deriving from Wittgenstein's early work and discussed by Marion and Okada is the idea of an operation (TLP 5.21 ff.) and, in particular, of the *repetition* of an operation. One reason why this discussion is helpful is that it shows that a great deal of what may appear new in Wittgenstein's reflections around 1929 can be seen to have at least some of its roots in the early thought as spelled out in his *Tractatus*.

As Severin Schroeder observes (in "The Origins of Wittgenstein's Verificationism"), TLP 6.5 ("If a question can be raised at all, then it can be answered as well") can be read as meaning that a statement will count as making a specific kind of sense only if it involves some understanding of how to verify (or falsify) it. And Schroeder goes on to say that, e.g. in the process of showing that given mathematical propositions are necessary truths, certain applications of the truth-table method presuppose that we are familiar with methods of demonstrating the truth of those propositions (and hence of verifying them). Thus, while we may say that roots of verificationism can be detected in the *Tractatus*, these roots are not to be found in Wittgenstein's account of empirical propositions but in his remarks on mathematics. As Schroeder emphasises, Wittgenstein's observation that every mathematical proposition is a cheque (*Anweisung*) for a verification (PR, p. 174) can be read as summarising the verification-

ism of his early middle period, and here it is instructive to learn that this metaphor can be seen to play an important role in an earlier article by the intuitionist Weyl (Schroeder, p. 32).

In Pascal Zambito's view as outlined in his contribution to the volume under review ("Searching in Space vs. Groping in the Dark") some features characteristic of Wittgenstein's philosophy in 1929 can be seen to be present in his writings from other periods as well. As Russell noticed early on, one such feature is Wittgenstein's tendency to articulate conceptual relations in terms of "spaces" or "collections of possibilities" (WiC, p. 183). And in fact, the centrality of this terminology of "spaces" will be observed by most readers of Wittgenstein's manuscripts from the relevant period. Zambito considers three topics to show that conceptual questions concerning spaces are helpfully seen as connected with notions like *novelty*, *imagination*, and *creativity*. These topics are: the status of synthetic *a priori* propositions, the meaning of expressions like *search* (in a space or for a space), and Wittgenstein's comments on Ramsey. Much of the material Zambito draws on is pertinent and expertly discussed in his article, and for most readers his brief account of parallels between certain passages from Wittgenstein's manuscripts and the latter's sometimes mysterious allusions to a story told by Wilhelm Busch (*Himphamp*) will be an eye-opener. Zambito's remarks on Ramsey, on the other hand, and in particular on Wittgenstein's well-known observation about

Ramsey as a “bourgeois thinker” (C&V, p. 24), are less satisfactory in so far as they present what is obviously meant as a description of Ramsey’s *attitude* as implying fruitful insights gained through reflection on Wittgenstein’s “philosophical method” (Zambito, p. 54).

As many commentators have noticed, while the expression “logic” is used by Wittgenstein in more than one sense it is required to have a fairly stable core-meaning if it is to be useful in the sort of inquiry attempted by him. In “The Color-Exclusion Problem and the Development of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Logic” Oskari Kuusela gives an account of Wittgenstein’s notion of logic which involves telling part of the story of the development of Wittgenstein’s ideas about logic as advanced in his earlier and later writings and, in particular, in the manuscripts of his early middle period: the early work (TLP) is characterised by the aim of finding a way of spelling out the general propositional form, whereas the later philosophy explicitly revokes that aim. The colour exclusion problem, on the other hand, can be seen as standing at the centre of Wittgenstein’s considerations around 1929, leading him to set out his new conception of *Satzsysteme* (propositional systems – viz. systems which, like measuring rods, are applied in their entirety and all at one go). As Kuusela makes clear, this conception can appear fruitful and promising, which is one reason for wondering why it plays no obvious role in Wittgenstein’s later writings. In Kuusela’s view, one pos-

sible means of illustrating the potential usefulness of this idea may be discovered by construing *Satzsysteme* as simple models of language-use that can profitably be compared with complex actual forms of speech and thus help us in our business of clarification. This is surely an intriguing way of approaching the development of Wittgenstein’s notion(s) of logic, even if one feels less sure than Kuusela seems to be that this is “what Wittgenstein [in PI] means by turning the examination around” (Kuusela, p. 74; cf. PI §108).

One of the most striking features of Wittgenstein’s writings from 1929 is the presence of apparently far-fetched scenarios involving stories about pains and other experiences lacking an identifiable substratum that could be seen as a potential bearer of those pains. Such stories are the sort of thought experiments discussed by Mauro Engelmann in his piece (“What Would It Look Like? Wittgenstein’s Radical Thought Experiments”). As Engelmann points out, these thought experiments are used by Wittgenstein to test, not the truth of, but rather the sense made by the stories we may invent to illustrate our understanding of projects like those envisaged by Wittgenstein in 1929 in the course of elaborating the ideas of a phenomenological language and of grammar in phenomenology. What comes as a surprise is Engelmann’s way of bringing hinge propositions à la Moore to bear on Wittgenstein’s thought experiments to ask in a general fashion whether Wittgenstein in 1929 (or in his later

writings, for that matter) would have been able to draw a clear and stable distinction between questions of meaning and questions of fact—a distinction he would seem to need for the purpose of giving a coherent account of his thought experiments.

The expressions “not possible” and “not necessary” figuring in the subtitle of Florian Franken Figueiredo’s contribution to the volume edited by himself (“Phenomenological Language: ‘Not Possible’ or ‘Not Necessary?’”) allude to a passage well-known to readers of *Philosophical Remarks*: on the first page of this book Wittgenstein states that he no longer regards a phenomenological language as his goal because he does not regard it as *necessary* any more. What has surprised many readers is the circumstance that, in spite of this assertion, on many of the following pages Wittgenstein does talk about the idea of a phenomenological language as if it were a going concern. Now Franken Figueiredo adds yet another surprising observation by pointing out that the manuscript (as opposed to the PR-typescript) version of the remark cited above has the word “possible” rather than the word “necessary” (*nötig*, meaning “needed”). As the author makes clear, very different stories could be told about the development of Wittgenstein’s philosophy around 1929 according to whether his remark is read as a statement about the possibility or about the necessity of a phenomenological language. And in the course of arguing his case Franken Figueiredo makes helpful

use of Wittgenstein’s metaphorical distinction between film images on a screen (phenomena as directly experienced: first system, data, phenomenological language) and images on a film-strip (second system, physical language). The remarks quoted and discussed by Franken Figueiredo show that already in the autumn of 1929 Wittgenstein arrived at the conclusion that “all our forms of speech are taken from ordinary, physical language and cannot be used in epistemology or phenomenology without casting a distorting light on their objects” (PR, p. 88).

In the Preface to his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein expresses gratitude for critical comments Frank Ramsey articulated in the course of “innumerable conversations” they had in 1929. This criticism, Wittgenstein says, helped him to recognise “grave mistakes” he had made in the *Tractatus*. As a matter of fact, the earliest contact between the two men had been the translation of Wittgenstein’s early work, which was produced when Ramsey was barely eighteen. The first critical encounter between them was the Critical Notice Ramsey wrote for *Mind*, which was published in the same year (1923) in which Ramsey paid a longish visit to Wittgenstein, who was at that time working as a *Volksschullehrer* in Lower Austria. Part of the story is here told by Cheryl Misak (in “Hypotheses and Expectations: Ramsey and Wittgenstein 1929”), who has given far more detailed accounts in two books published a few years ago. Misak emphasises similarities between

Ramsey's ideas and Wittgenstein's views on belief, hypotheses and various other matters. According to Misak, the development of Wittgenstein's thought was a kind of journey leading away from the *Tractatus* and at the same time steering towards a quasi-pragmatist understanding of our linguistic capacities and achievements. She suggests that Ramsey's assistance was indispensable as a catalyst for Wittgenstein's self-criticism and the new ideas expressed in his writings from 1929 onwards.

Most attempts at characterising the specificity of Wittgenstein's thought around 1929 mention the colour-exclusion problem set out by Ramsey in his Critical Notice of the *Tractatus*. Here he says that "the apparently simple concepts red, blue" turn out to be "really complex and formally incompatible", thus raising a number of difficulties concerning, for example, Wittgenstein's claims that elementary propositions are mutually independent and that logical necessity is the only kind of necessity there is. Michael Hymers (in his piece on "Simplicity in Wittgenstein's 1929 Manuscripts") describes and discusses several possible reactions to Ramsey's problem. As Hymers points out, the question of simple objects is important because their existence could be expected to help us to hold on to atomic facts. This hope, however, can be seen to run afoul of Wittgenstein's arguments against various features of sense-datum theories and act-object analyses of perception as defended by Moore and Russell, for instance, who hold that a sense-

datum is an *object* that one can become aware of through an *act* of perception. Hymers makes out a strong case for thinking that Wittgenstein's later grammatical reflections on aspect-seeing are in some ways foreshadowed by many of his remarks from the 1929 manuscripts. What will be of especial interest to readers of the early-middle-period writings are two sections of Hymers' article where he discusses Wittgenstein's response to Russell's former pupil Jean Nicod (see MS 105, p. 43 f.).

Mihai Ometiță (in "Temptations of Purity: Phenomenological Language and Immediate Experience") guides his readers along a complicated array of byroads and hidden paths to arrive at the conclusion that Wittgenstein's project to construct a phenomenological language did not meet with success. There is some overlap with Mauro Engelmann's contribution in the sense that Ometiță too discusses some of Wittgenstein's thought experiments: the first of these is "autobiographical" and attempts to elucidate the notion of "an omniscient first-person perspective" (p. 163); the second one employs the idea of a set of plaster-cast figures used to represent the visual images constituting our immediate experiences; the third one involves the fantasy of a crank-driven mechanism that allows a couple of as it were disembodied eyes to receive the images concerned. Ometiță notes that PI §261 repeats words used in 1929 (MS 105, pp. 97-98) to make fun of a quotation from Driesch. He thinks that this repetition might indicate a di-

rection in which further research into Wittgenstein's "quest for a phenomenological language" could fruitfully move (Ometiță, p. 167). —In my view some of Ometiță remarks are hard to follow on account of the fact that he modified the translations of numerous passages from Wittgenstein he thought worth quoting. I compared all these passages and found that on the whole the published translations are clearly preferable to Ometiță's modified versions.

Given the topic of her article, it is not surprising that there is some overlap between Jasmin Trächtler's paper ("Speaking of the Given: The Structure of Visual Space and the Limits of Language") and other contributions to the volume under review: she too mentions a number of reasons for thinking that Wittgenstein *had* to arrive at a position where he could not help giving up the projects of spelling out how to describe phenomena and how to construct a phenomenological language. Readers of Trächtler's piece will be grateful to her for bringing up and profitably discussing the fascinating topic of *omissions* (or *gaps*) in representation. This is one of the most engaging issues dealt with by Wittgenstein in his writings from the relevant time. Thus he wonders what it might amount to if I painted a picture of a certain visual image refraining, however, from putting paint everywhere (in other words, "I should let the canvas show through at certain places" [PR, p. 115]). Now, it is clear that this gap – this decision to abstain from applying paint to certain places on the canvas – can be made

sense of in various ways (as Trächtler says [p. 181], "Spatial omissions are [...] notoriously ambiguous"): it might for example mean that the corresponding parts of my visual image bore no colour that can be found on my palette or that I have forgotten which colour they were, and so forth. At any rate, it seems that the existence of such gaps is not obviously compatible with the supposed continuity of the visual field and thus raises new difficulties for Wittgenstein's original conception of this field.

Duncan Richter (in "The Good, the Divine, and the Supernatural") discusses central concepts from Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Ethics*, that is to say, concepts like those mentioned in his title, the distinction between relative and absolute value, "absolute safety", "experience *par excellence*", and other notions well-known to readers of that lecture and the secondary literature dealing with its topics. The background of Richter's reflections is a discussion between Cora Diamond and Michael Kremer. These authors focus on certain passages from *Philosophical Investigations*, in particular §107, which is read as referring to "a conflict" that could be seen as having taken place in Wittgenstein's thought around 1929. This interpretation is fruitfully illustrated and supported by quotations from Wittgenstein's manuscripts, "Some Remarks on Logical Form", the *Lecture on Ethics*, and in many cases Richter's characterisations of Wittgenstein's words hit the nail on the head, for instance when he says of the better part of the lecture that it is "like

one long false start” (p. 203). A good deal of the content of Richter’s piece is alluded to by a quotation from MS 107, where Wittgenstein notes in November 1929: “If something is good, then it is also divine. Strangely this summarizes my ethics. | Only the supernatural can express the supernatural” (Richter, p. 195). He is surely right in foregrounding this passage, even though he misreads Wittgenstein in claiming of this remark that “even he [Wittgenstein] admits that it is strange” (this claim is repeated on p. 208, where Richter speaks of “Wittgenstein’s strange identification of the good with the divine”). Strangeness, however, is attributed, not to the quoted remark, but to the observation that the first sentence serves, or suffices, to summarise his ethics.

All in all, reading the essays in this collection can be very rewarding: it can help us to see the development of Wittgenstein’s ideas after his return to Cambridge more clearly, and it is above all through the comparatively narrow focus on one – long – year

that it will be possible for us to perceive the physiognomy of his thought very distinctly.

University of Zurich
joachim.schulte(at)access.uzh.ch

References

- McGuinness, B. (ed.), 2012. *Wittgenstein in Cambridge: Letters and Documents 1911-1951*. 4th ed. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. (WiC)
- Wittgenstein, L., 1922. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Tr. C. K. Ogden and F. Ramsey. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul. (TLP)
- Wittgenstein, L., 1975. *Philosophical Remarks*. Ed. R. Rhees. Oxford: Blackwell, 1975. (PR)
- Wittgenstein, L., 1998. *Culture and Value*. Ed. G.H. von Wright. 2nd rev. ed. by A. Pichler. Oxford: Blackwell. (C&V)
- Wittgenstein, L., 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. Rev. 4th ed by P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. (PI)