

FROM THE ARCHIVES
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Wittgenstein to Sraffa: Two newly- discovered letters from February and March 1934

Abstract

This paper introduces and publishes two letters from 1934 written by Wittgenstein to Sraffa. The first of these confirms that on the one hand Wittgenstein and Sraffa had communicative difficulties. On the other hand Wittgenstein acknowledged the strength of Sraffa's thinking and he was aware of being positively influenced by it. The second longer letter is part of a debate between Wittgenstein and Sraffa that had been ongoing in the few weeks preceding the letter. In the letter, Wittgenstein tried to clarify and review in part his thinking on the points he discussed during the debate.

Two of Wittgenstein's letters addressed to Sraffa and considered lost were found a few months ago. Trinity College Library bought both letters and stored them among the collections of additional manuscripts: they are catalogued as Add_ms_a_427_93a/ and Add_ms_a_427_97a.¹

¹ Facsimiles of the two letters can be found on http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/Add_ms_a_427_93a/manuscript.php?fullpage=1&startingpage=1

The two letters were written in 1934. The letter of 21 February 1934 (Add_ms_a_427_93a) is – as we can read – related to a conversation held the previous day between Wittgenstein and Sraffa. No appointment on 20 February 1934 has been recorded in either of their pocket diaries (SP E6: 20; De Iaco 2018a: 90) and therefore this conversation probably happened in addition to the scheduled meetings. From the letter of 21 February it emerges that Wittgenstein and Sraffa had difficulties in understanding each other, which gave Wittgenstein “a tragic feeling”. Wittgenstein acknowledges his “great respect” for “the strength” of Sraffa’s thinking. The philosopher appreciates the economist’s way of thinking, but the latter didn’t appreciate that of the former. As Wittgenstein himself surmised, the lack of appreciation could be due, to “a certain kind of crookedness” of his thoughts which made Sraffa suspicious and led the latter to believe that Wittgenstein was trying to cheat him. As far as Wittgenstein was concerned, the difficulties they faced in understanding each other made Wittgenstein anxious because he didn’t intend to lose the benefits of Sraffa’s influence on his thinking. This is further evidence of Wittgenstein’s debt to Sraffa – a debt the philosopher had already acknowledged in a letter of 19 January 1934 where he said: “I have learnt an enormous amount from you in the conversations we had during the past 2 or 3 years” (Wittgenstein 2008: 222). In 1945, Wittgenstein wrote in the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations* that “for the most consequential ideas of this book” he was indebted to the stimulus that his thoughts increasingly received for many years from Sraffa’s criticism (1953: viii). Then, there is the testimony of von Wright according to which Wittgenstein said that “his discussions with Sraffa finally made him feel like a tree from which all branches had been cut” (1955: 539). In the letter to Sraffa dated 23 August 1949, Wittgenstein argued about the

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http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/Add_ms_a_427_97a/manuscript.php?fullpage=1&startingpage=1

I would like to thank my friend Alessandro Aprile, librarian at the Hannover University Library, who informed me of the presence of Wittgenstein’s letter of February 1934 in a sales catalogue. I would also like to thank Jonathan Smith and the Trinity College Library in Cambridge for making these two letters available to me and for the permission to publish them here. Finally, thanks go to Jonathan Smith and Nivedita Gangopadhyay as well as Alois Pichler from the Bergen Wittgenstein Archives for valuable advice and corrections.

difficulties of understanding each other in their intercourse and he wrote: “only by a real tour de force it was possible for us to talk to each other years ago when we were younger. And if I may compare you to a mine in which I worked to get some precious ore, I must say that my labour was *extremely* hard; though also that what I got out of it was well worth the labour” (Wittgenstein 2008: 450).

In the quoted letter of 19 January 1934, Wittgenstein has already realized that the conversations which he had with Sraffa over the last six or nine months were always a great strain for him, and he supposed that to be case for Sraffa too (cf. 2008: 222). Despite the benefits of Sraffa’s influence on Wittgenstein’s thoughts and the Sraffa’s preference for direct discussions and face-to-face meetings (cf. Cospito 2016: 114), it became increasingly difficult for them to communicate. Therefore, in May 1946 Sraffa decided to stop their meetings (cf. 1990: 487).

A main reason Wittgenstein and Sraffa had difficulties communicating is that the natural movements of their thoughts were different, as Wittgenstein notes in the letter of 21 February 1934 published below. If Sraffa’s habit of staying on the topic and referring to concrete situations in order to give sense to the phenomena in a linear way was obsessively punctual and rigorous, Wittgenstein’s thinking, according to Sraffa’s judgements, was vague and didn’t give concrete answers to the problems. Wittgenstein’s method was to compare disconnected things and Sraffa didn’t find this method useful for directly discussing the questions.

The letter of 21 February has the same date as the notes for Sraffa which may be part of it². These notes have been published in *Wittgenstein in Cambridge* (Wittgenstein 2008: 225-226). In the notes, arguing from the relation between changes of fashion and changes of taste, Wittgenstein goes on to develop the discussion begun the previous month about the possibility of Nazification of Austria and its consequences in terms of political and way of life changes. The notes exchanged and discussed by Wittgenstein and Sraffa from the end of January until the beginning of March 1934 concern this same topic, to which the second newly discovered letter is related (Add_ms_a_427_97a). It is dated “Sunday, 11.3.1934”.

² Jonathan Smith told me that if it was there must be a missing page between the two items.

The draft of the second letter had already been written on 27 February 1934 when Wittgenstein said to Sraffa in another letter: “I wrote a long letter 10 pages in answer to yours which I got on Saturday. I wrote it in pencil and so badly that you couldn’t read it; also, parts are only sketched. If I can I’ll write it out properly (or dictate it). Just now I can’t as I’m not well (nerves and bladder). I’m afraid I can’t see you next Sunday as someone is coming to visit me. But Sunday March 11th would do me. Shall I come to your room?” (Wittgenstein 2008: 228). Wittgenstein was only able to write out this letter on 11 March (*ibidem* 229), but he postponed the scheduled meeting with Sraffa on that day because he thought he was “at the end of his force” and, having to lecture the day after, he preferred being “in the open air all the afternoon”, instead of doing something “which at all strains” him (*ibidem*). They were to meet on 16 March (SP E6: 25).

As the letter of 31 January 1934 shows, Wittgenstein and Sraffa were discussing the idea that even Austria could be nazified and that the Austrians, according to Sraffa, “*can* do most of the things the Germans did” (Wittgenstein 2008: 223). Wittgenstein was sceptical that Sraffa’s ideas could be demonstrated. Sraffa, who considered Wittgenstein “naïve from the political point of view” – as Sen and Steinworth reported (cf. De Iaco 2018b: 325) – invited Wittgenstein to learn from what had happened in Italy. With the aim of pointing out that it is a fallacy to consider that “every action which people do is *preceded* by a particular state of mind of which the action is the outcome” (Wittgenstein 2008: 225), Wittgenstein started to compare the prediction of the effects of the Nazification of Austria with the prediction of the changes of physiognomy on the basis of the changes in muscle contractions of the face (cf. *ibidem* 223). He then went on to compare the idea with the view that changes in fashion depend on changes in taste (cf. *ibidem* 225). According to Wittgenstein, one supposes that there is a reservoir in which the real causes of facts are kept, therefore when one speaks of changes of Government “one is tempted to think of such a reservoir, i.e. ‘the mentality of a people’” which does not change (*ibidem*).

We can deduce that Sraffa suggested that Wittgenstein should not argue from Germany’s physiognomy to know what would happen

in Germany and Wittgenstein found this suggestion to be correct, but not for the reason that physiognomy is vague as Sraffa thought. According to Wittgenstein, in fact, the fallacy in arguing from physiognomy is due to arguing “from a prejudice that certain things will not change” (*ibidem*). Sraffa, in his few notes which have been kept – his letters to Wittgenstein are all but one still considered lost – said that all these comparisons which Wittgenstein made in his argument are, for him, straying from the point. Sraffa suggested that Wittgenstein “must try to stick to a point & not saunter from one to the other, apparently disconnected” and he (Sraffa) “cannot be content with hints or allusions” (*ibidem* 227). Their method of reasoning was clearly different and if for Wittgenstein it was a strain following Sraffa’s sticking to a point, for Sraffa Wittgenstein’s way of argument jumping from one point to another in an apparently disconnected way was dispersive and draining. The economist, from a more analytic and scientific perspective than that of Wittgenstein, underlined the necessity to give to the questions answers which can be taken into account, which can be considered concrete, visible, measurable things, and which are not spoiled by the prejudices and feelings of the moment. Physiognomies, Sraffa said, are not such things because they “are made up of my prejudices, sympathies etc; & I know by experience that my view of the phys. changes always after – long after –” and not before, which would have to be the case for it to be advantageous for “the events I was trying to predict happened” (*ibidem* 227). But Wittgenstein, as he tried to explain in the letter dated 11 March 1934 published below, referred to physiognomy because he thought that when one speaks about the mentality of people one should not think of mentality as a mental reservoir that causes ways of acting, behaviours, customs, etc., but one should think of a sum of phenomena observable in the life of a nation: habits, ways of dressing, hygiene, manners, etc. Wittgenstein – answering Sraffa’s criticism – acknowledged that he had made a mistake when he called fascism a kind of physiognomy, because “fascism isn’t a face, but a form of government”. However, Wittgenstein does not seem to believe in forecasts of the future actions of a nation based on a sort of scientific method that reduced them to measured and counted things. According to Wittgenstein, the data for these forecasts would be “clear cut facts” and if one ignores the relevant facts of a nation

and draws conclusions about its future actions from irrelevant ones, one will talk preposterously. However, the pivotal point for Wittgenstein seems to be the impossibility of giving an exact reason for the change of actions of a nation because there are probably different reasons for this change. The same is the case for the changes of taste and we can only say what we see from this change, we can only draw attention to the visible elements of it, to the physiognomy of this change. It is conceivable that this position probably left Sraffa dissatisfied, as he had underlined the necessity of finding a reservoir of things which change primarily – such as “there will be no social party, there won’t be Jewish judges, etc. etc.” (Wittgenstein 2008: 223) – starting from which it is possible to predict easily and with certainty the future actions of a nation (cf. *ibidem* 226). From his (political and economic) point of view, “intuitions are a way of acting” and they don’t need explanations which justify them rationally (cf. *ibidem* 229). For Sraffa rationalizing the reasons that led Austria to be nazified is meaningless because it is important to consider what might change in people’s actions in order to understand what Austrians might do in the near future. They are intuitions for Sraffa because they were “natural” in the historical circumstances in which Austrians were living and what one finds “natural”, as Sraffa writes in a note dated pre 1928 (SP D1/7), doesn’t need to be explained. The historical circumstances play an important role in Sraffa’s perspective. During the discussions with Wittgenstein, the economist criticized the lack of the historical dimension in Wittgenstein’s way of thinking.

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Legend to the transcription of the two letters below:

- < >: part added by Wittgenstein
[]: part deleted by Wittgenstein
[x]: part deleted by Wittgenstein, not deciphered

Wittgenstein’s grammar and orthography have been gently normalized.

Biographical Note

Moira De Iaco (b. 1985) received her DPhil in Theory of Language and Science of Signs by the University of Bari. Since 2017 she has started teaching at the Department of Languages, Literature and Arts of Bari’s University. She is finishing her second PhD in Philosophy at the Universities of Salento and Cologne working on Sraffa’s Influence on Wittgenstein. She is author of several articles and two monographies about Wittgenstein’s philosophy (*Solipsismo e alterità. Wittgenstein e il mito dell’interiorità* and *Il segreto dell’arte. Duchamp e Wittgenstein*). She has earlier published “A list of meetings between Wittgenstein and Sraffa” in *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 7 (1) 2018.

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Dear Sraffa,³

This is likely to become a long letter for I feel there are many things which I should like, & perhaps ought, to say. Our conversation yesterday has impressed me greatly, for though in a sense it was quite futile it showed [to] me [quite x] «certain» phenomena in our mental intercourse which I had often seen before but never as «absolutely» clearly as yesterday. But I don't mean that I am clear about their cause, in fact that is quite obscure to me. The thoughts in this letter will be very disconnected, i. e. not well arranged, – as all my thoughts are.

I don't exaggerate when I say that it gives me a tragic feeling when I see how impossible it is to make myself understood to you. Whether I also am unable to understand that you say I don't know.

When [I], in the middle of an unsuccessful discussion, I express my great respect for [your] the strength «x» of your thinking this is never a mere façon de parler but always the expression of a real feeling [of mine]. In a «curious» way I then enjoy appreciating your way of thinking [«knowing that you don't,»] when you cannot «at all» appreciate mine. But this is not due to a superiority [of mine] in me but to something like a difference in age. I don't mean the actual difference in years.

³ The letter is dated by Sraffa in pencil “21.2.34”.

I believe that what, amongst other things, makes it impossible for you to follow the way I think is a certain kind of crookedness of my thoughts (I don't mean this «expression» as a blame [them]). They are «so» very [so] often doing such things like looping the loop. Of course [I don't do it] not for fun, but it's just my natural way of thinking, & it isn't yours. You [don't] never expect me to go where I'm actually going; &, very naturally, you often react just as though I had been trying to cheat you. (I wonder if you remember the «kind» of situation I mean.) And this reaction is queer for me to watch.

Knowing all I do know about the difficulty to understand each other when the natural movements of thought are different I feel extremely anxious that I should not lose the [great] benefit of your influence on my mind through some sort of obstinacy on my part. The temptation to such obstinacy [naturally] of course exists for me [in our] in discussions with you; for I must discuss with someone who never gives me the satisfaction, which make discussions easy, of seeing my point. I hope you will understand that I don't mean by this: agreeing in a way which makes discussion unnecessary. But it is the attention which one pays to what one's opponent says & the pleasure which one takes in what he says that enables him to go on «it is this which sustains the two parties in a good discussion». And this is the case even if you entirely disagree with him as long as you only think that he is [x] an opponent worth having. Again, I'm afraid I you'll think that I am talking of manners, lack of politeness etc. But I am not.» [& if x]

Add_ms_a_427_97a

Sunday⁴

Dear Sraffa!

1) When I said: “the changes of fashion are due to lots of different causes” I – of course – didn’t [mean] think this was an answer to the question asking for the causes. Nor did I mean to say that such causes could not be given & that therefore the question [was] ought not to have been asked. I only stated a) that it was no answer to that question to say that the changes of fashion are due to a change of taste & that b) contrary to this pseudo-answer which seems to give one cause the real answer should have to enumerate “lots of different causes”; «many of» which [partly] I don’t know & which [partly] it wasn’t my business then to enumerate.

2) I didn’t wish to say that there was[n’t] no such thing as taste, or, which comes to the same, that the word “taste” has not its legitimate uses. What I criticized was only, to think of it as some mental source of our actions, rather than as a complex of phenomena of which these actions (alongside with thoughts, feelings, etc.) are part. That’s why I said that what we call the change of taste partly consists in our designing new [shapes of suits] fashions.

⁴ Wittgenstein wrote only “Sunday”; the letter is dated by Sraffa in pencil “11.3.34”.

3) When I subsequently talked of the mentality of a people I did not speak of that imaginary reservoir which I had just rejected but of a sum of <[observed]> phenomena which one observes in the life of a nation. I mean phenomena of the following kind: How they dress; whether there is a great difference of dress between the higher classes & the middle class or lower middle class. What they eat; whether they take greater or less care to prepare their food. Table manners and their distribution [in] <amongst> the <social classes. Family life. Politeness of policemen & railway guards etc. Are you liable to be cheated in shops? If you come into a restaurant is it noisy or quiet. Cleanliness, kind of cleanliness. Forms of politeness. etc. etc. etc. Now if you ask what there is in common between all these phenomena I should answer that they are the kind of things that are [obs] noticed by an unscientific onlooker that they are the things which a man observes <without> studying statistics, counting or measuring anything. And they constitute the physiognomy or mentality of a people. The coal supply is not part of this physiognomy. (The word physiognomy <here> is [well chosen] a suitable expression because similar to the physiognomy of a human being it refers to something which appears to the common observer).

You said in your letter that I went off my track because I didn't say "that it is not true that a change of actions of a nation is preceded by a change of mentality". I did not say this explicitly as I had already said it in my example of the change of fashion. When I went on to talk about the mentality of a people I

meant a particular selection of their actions. That's why I gave the example of the [example of this] king & the crown. For the crown is an observable phenomenon just like the form of government, only it's a phenomenon belonging to the physiognomy.

4) It is not true that I ended up in "complete despair" after having [x] said that the mentality of a people can change & that it isn't to be taken as the invariable centre round which [its actions] their way of acting turns. What I said wasn't that [the physiognomy (mentality) of a nation could] nothing could be taken as the pivot round which these changes take place but only that the physiognomy (mentality) wasn't this pivot; & that on the other hand one was strongly tempted to take it as the pivot because it is the thing that impressed itself strongest on our mind. Stronger than certain other most important facts which are less obvious to the normal observer.

5) I never said that the Austrians couldn't go fascist because it was incompatible with their mentality. I said that I could not imagine how this change could take place. The mistake I made was that I called fascism a kind of physiognomy & my difficulty was: how can the Austrian face change into that face which I called fascism. The answer to this should have been: Fascism isn't a face but a form of government, etc. etc. & though it is true that the face of Austrian fascism won't be like the face of German & Italian fascism still the form of government etc. etc. will be fascism. – It is as though I had asked: "how can this man get drunk; I know what drunkards look like & he can never

[have the face of] look like those I've seen." The answer is: drunkenness is not an appearance. True, this [x] man won't look like the others, he'll look different, but he'll be drunk, i. e.: he'll have an excess of alcohol in his organism.

6) If you say that as the pivot, or standard, such things must be taken which one can see "clearly, easily, & quickly" my answer is this: If there is a scientific method of foretelling the future actions of nations, the data used for your forecasts will not be more or less vague impressions, difficult to put into words, but clear-cut facts. If I want to know what the weather is going to be tomorrow, I might ask a meteorologist, – <that is> if there is a meteorology which can answer such questions. He will <then> tell the <weather> from wind – & pressure charts & other measurements of various sorts. If there isn't such a science I shall ask a man who has had lots of experience of the weather in this district & he will perhaps tell me: "To me it looks, as though it were going to rain tomorrow". On being asked what his criteria are he may say such things as: "it's the peculiar look of the sky" & such like. [Now x] Now <I> may or may not have had the experience that this man's forecasts are as a rule correct. Is he in the possession of a scientific meteorology? No. – Do I despise such a science? No. – But I don't know that such a science exists. If it does I'll only be too glad to avail myself of it.

If you are able to make trustworthy forecasts about the future of Germany from the quantity of coal produced etc., in a word from <things> measured[ments] & counted, this is wonderful & I should not dream to set my

vague & unreliable impressions up against your well established scientific results. No more than I should say to the chemist: “I don’t believe that Hydrogen + Oxygen combine to water; they don’t look to me like it”. You therefore [may] have a right to say to me: “W. you talk through your hat if you make conjectures about the future of Austria; you don’t know the relevant facts & you draw conclusions from irrelevant ones”. To this I should entirely agree; particularly if [you] I was sure that you possessed a method to make a reliable forecast from measurements. For only the existence of such a method (which has been tried & formed reliably), not the mere idea that there could be one, could be set up against conjectures which [x] admittedly, are based on (pretty) vague & unsafe grounds. You may say: the grounds are not “pretty” unsafe, but entirely unsafe & therefore [it would be better no] (one) should refrain from basing conjectures on them. To this I should disagree.

I will give an example which at first sight seems to have nothing to do with our conversations. Suppose someone asked me: “What is the reason why people nowadays make the ceilings of their cellars flat & not vaulted as they used to 50 years ago?” The answer would be one which could be given in a straightforward (scientific) way. I shall say: People nowadays use (re-enforced) concrete; this technique allows to cover long stretches between walls & pillars with a flat ceiling; I should then go into the price of such a construction as opposed to vaults, etc. Suppose on the other hand someone asked me: Why do you say that if someone today built a house like the palazzo Venezia he would

make the windows arched & not square, the sort of reason I gave for flat ceilings in the cellar could not be given.

Supposing I had answered: “Well, I know the taste of modern architects”. This would have been a true statement though no answer to the question “why?”. For knowing the taste amongst other things means knowing what they would do. On the other hand I shouldn’t be able to give any exact reasons for my forecast. I could only say that I have seen [such] a lot of what they’ve built, know what they say, what they think architecture is, etc. etc. & this prompts me to say what I do say.

I will not go on because I’m not clear headed enough at present & could not make even a moderately decent job of the argument.