

BOOK REVIEWS
Editor: Jasmin Trächtler

*Understanding Wittgenstein, Understanding
Modernism*

Anat Matar (ed.)

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This volume is part of a series of anthologies entitled “Understanding Philosophy, Understanding Modernism”, each of which focuses on a particular (male) 20th century philosopher. Anat Matar, the editor of the Wittgenstein volume, defines modernism by quoting the art critic Clement Greenberg:

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.

According to Greenberg, this self-critical movement began with Kant. Disciplinary self-scrutiny is, of course, a distinctive mark of Wittgenstein’s attitude to philosophy, and this may be taken to justify placing him within a

modernist tradition. According to Matar (p. 2), Wittgenstein also shares with modernism “an intense interest in language” (I should rather have said: “an intense *awareness* of language”). Her hope for this volume is that an inquiry into the relation between Wittgenstein and modernism will enrich our understanding of both.

As in all the volumes in the series, the contributions are grouped into three sections, here called “Conceptualizing Wittgenstein”, “Wittgenstein and Aesthetics”, and “Glossary”. Section one opens with an essay by John Skorupski on Wittgenstein’s mysticism, asceticism and cultural alienation. Skorupski calls Wittgenstein “the *pre-eminent* philosophical modernist” because of the way he “fused the ideas about the pseudo-problematic nature of philosophy [by which I take he means Wittgenstein’s view of

philosophical issues as pseudo-problems] with [a] distinctively ‘mystical’, ‘ethical’ and cultural interest” (p. 14). In Wittgenstein’s work, his early mysticism broadens into an asceticism of intellectual restraint and indirection.

The next two essays place Wittgenstein in the context of modern and contemporary philosophy. Oskari Kuusela traces a continuum of self-critical (self-reflective) stances in philosophy from Kant over Husserl and Heidegger and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* on to the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In their joint contribution, Hans-Johann Glock and Javier Kalhat outline the relation between the methodological outlooks of Wittgenstein on the one hand and the ordinary language philosophers Austin, Ryle, Strawson and Grice on the other. Both Kuusela’s and Glock and Kalhat’s essays outline affinities and differences without claims to actual historical influence. Though they express conflicting outlooks on Wittgenstein’s philosophy, I found both essays clear and instructive.

Thomas Wallgren’s essay constitutes the boldest departure from the readings of Wittgenstein on offer today. His aim is to establish that Wittgenstein is at bottom a political philosopher in the enlightenment tradition. Wallgren’s argument is somewhat convoluted, but the following, I believe, is the gist of it. Wittgenstein’s concern, he argues, is not with what he calls everyday politics, with debates about democracy, power, oppression, etc., but with the habits of thought and the prejudices which define what

it is possible to say in the culture. Wallgren gives three examples of such prejudices: (1) The conviction that philosophy and science show that naturalism (or, we might say, reductionism) is an intellectually respectable stance where the human mind is concerned. This conviction, he claims, has had unfortunate consequences for clinical psychology, leading to the overdiagnosis of mental problems and overprescription of drugs. (2) The belief that economics has a degree of exactness which lends it an authority surpassing that of the other social sciences, a notion which, Wallgren argues, is based on an inflated notion of mathematical exactness criticized by Wittgenstein. (3) The notion that game theory provides a model for the study of human rational behaviour. This notion, it might be thought (though this is not spelled out by Wallgren), is undermined by Wittgenstein’s critique of narrowly intellectualistic accounts of human thought and action (the belief-desire model). These ideas, Wallgren argues, are aspects of the belief in progress through science of which Wittgenstein is critical. If one is prepared to consider this a political standpoint, he claims, Wittgenstein must be held to be a political thinker.

This claim calls for a comment. Wallgren would hardly argue that Wittgenstein himself thought of his work as political in any sense of the word. We may concede that Wittgenstein provides artillery for puncturing some scientific ideas which are highly influential in contemporary Western culture. In notebooks from the

1930's, e.g. in the "sketch for a foreword" (*Culture and Value*), he contrasted his own philosophical strivings with the progressive spirit of the age. (We may note that *this* theme is absent from the *Investigations*). If one is so minded, one may no doubt find inspiration for a critique of contemporary political culture in Wittgenstein's work.

However, to cast Wittgenstein as an enlightenment thinker, as Wallgren wishes to do, is surely misdirected. He suggests that in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein aims, not at an undermining but at "a transformation" of reason. These terms seem to me to be alien to Wittgenstein's concerns. A characteristic trait of Wittgenstein's work is that he turns his back on philosophy's traditional preoccupation with the concept of reason. (The word "*Vernunft*" ("reason", "rationality") – as the name of a human capacity or propensity – does not appear a single time either in the *Tractatus* or in the *Investigations*. I suspect Wittgenstein would have thought that the preoccupation with these words simply obscures the effort to clarify the nature of thought and logic, in creating the impression that reason is something one might decide either to celebrate or to turn one's back on.)

As the title suggests, Danièle Moyal-Sharrock's essay "Too Cavellian a Wittgenstein: Wittgenstein's Certainty, Cavell's Scepticism" is a polemic against Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. Wittgenstein and Cavell, she admits, agree on the force of the "metaphysical impulse", which means, roughly, the

conviction that something beyond human agreement must underlie our ability to communicate with words. Wittgenstein's *Investigations* aims to dissolve that impulse. So far so good. Where Cavell goes wrong, Moyal-Sharrock argues, is in thinking that "the *Investigations* captures the disappointment felt by humans in dropping from metaphysical heights to the inadequacy of all too human criteria" (p. 101). However, she maintains, Wittgenstein is not disappointed in ordinary language. According to him, the fact that sense depends on actual use does not mean that it is in danger of being lost. She finds no ground in Wittgenstein's writings for speaking, as Cavell does (1979: 47) of "the standing threat to thought and communication that they are only human". She maintains that in learning to speak we are taught a technique of language use which ensures agreement.

Moyal-Sharrock seems well versed in Cavell's work. Admittedly, there is a plausibility in her reading. However, I am unsure how far the conflict she indicates is an actual one. For one thing, may one not agree with Wittgenstein that "ordinary language is in order as it is" and yet, in a metaphysical mood, be shaken by the worry – senseless though it is – that we human beings will not be able by ourselves to keep language on track? (To what extent Wittgenstein himself may have been motivated by such a worry is a different question.) Besides, the technique we acquire in learning to use words does not necessarily ensure agreement in actual cases:

consider the indeterminacy we may encounter in trying to plumb a person's motives, or in trying to establish what a country's constitution entails on this or that point of contention.

"In art, ethics and language, viewing the particular generically is a licence for inattention and dismissal..." (p.162) – this might serve as a motto for Garry Hagberg's rich essay "A Confluence of Modernisms: Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigation and Henry James's Literary Language". Hagberg makes the interesting observation that Wittgenstein is not only focused on how we do speak, but also, importantly, on what, in a philosophical discussion, we *feel an impulse* to say (but would not actually say): "It is an attention to what language itself seems to want to make us say" (p. 143). He sees an analogy between Wittgenstein's sensitivity to words and a modernist sensitivity as instantiated in the work and reflections of Henry James, giving instances from his novel *The Spoils of Poynton* of a fine-grained awareness of differences between what we would today call language-games; of how one game may imperceptibly change into another rather like the shifting of keys in a musical work.

As for the other four essays making up the section on Wittgenstein and aesthetics along with Hagberg's essay, they display an impressive erudition, manifested through an imaginative style of presentation, and they contain a number of pointed observations. However, I must confess that since they represent a tradition of argument and deal with subject matters with

which I am not sufficiently familiar, I find it hard to engage in debate with them.

Pierre Fasula, in "Wittgenstein, Musil and the Austrian Modernism", connects Wittgenstein's attitude to modernism with Musil's description of modernism in *The Man without Qualities*. Fasula quotes Ulrich's thoughts about progress from Musil's novel: "Progress always exists in only one particular sense. And since there's no sense in our life as a whole, neither is there such a thing as progress as a whole" (p. 121).

Élise Marrou's essay is called "We Should be Seeing Life Itself: Back to the Rough Ground of the Stage". She starts from Wittgenstein's remark, in *Culture and Value*, that being in a position to watch everyday life from outside would be uncanny and wonderful (cf. CV: 4). The essay deals with the impossibility of staging the everyday, especially with reference to photography and the theatre. (As I read her, the paradox she is dealing with is that brought out in the photographer exhorting her subjects to act natural: the problem is not that the order is hard to follow, but that it is self-contradictory.)

Antonia Soulez discusses Wittgenstein's double orientation towards modernism in her essay "Modernism with Spirit: Wittgenstein and the Sense of the Whole": on the one hand, he was passionate about romantic music, declaring that his own cultural ideal derives from Schumann, on the other hand in his methodological ideas he belonged to a philosophical *avant-garde*. Wittgenstein

lamented the loss of a “sense of the whole” in contemporary music, while he decided he himself was unable to write a unitary text. Whether he was unable to form a unitary *thought*, as Soulez maintains, is a different matter. (Somewhere along the way some of the German phrases have been mangled. A musical idea is a “*musikalischer Gedanke*” (not “*musikalische Gedanke*”), Schönberg’s opera is called “*Von Heute auf Morgen*” (not “*Von Heute zu Morgen*”), the name of Grillparzer’s short story is “*Der arme Spielmann*” (not “*Die Arme Spielman*”).)

David Schalkwyk, in “Wittgenstein and the Art of Defamiliarization” proposes to plot the relation between Wittgenstein, modernism and literature. His starting point is two remarks in *Culture and Value*, “philosophy ought really to be written as a form of *poetic composition*” (CV: 24), and “What I invent are new *similes*” (CV: 19). Wittgenstein’s use of similes to convey his thoughts, Schalkwyk suggests, are “a symptom of Wittgenstein’s embeddedness in a modernist world itself beset with tensions and contradictions” (p. 183). Other sections deal with Wittgenstein’s sense of displacement and with the relation between defamiliarization in Wittgenstein and in Russian formalism, especially Vladimir Shklovsky.

The glossary is not the least interesting part of the collection. It is especially valuable for those who want to get an overview of some core themes in Wittgenstein’s thinking. In particular, I would recommend Yuval Lurie’s essay on psychological concepts. It would serve perfectly as an

introduction to Wittgensteinian philosophy of mind. The gist of it is summed up as follows: “the uses [of psychological concepts] both for expressing ourselves and for describing others [...] support each other by forming our shared *psychopraxis*” (p. 247). Sebastian Sunday Grève’s article on logic and Stefan Brandt’s article on the concept of picture are also very useful.

Harvey Cormier, writing about use, I found, does not really go deeply into the different senses of “meaning as use”. He discusses Wittgenstein’s relation to William James’ pragmatism, from which he, wrongly according to Cormier, distanced himself. (There is an interesting note about Henry James discovering his brother’s thought and recognizing an affinity with it.) Ben Ware, in his article on ethics, draws connections between Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, in which he propounds the modernist view of the artwork as autonomous. David Macarthur outlines Wittgenstein’s attitude to art, pointing out that it has both romantic and modernist elements. (Reading this collection makes me wonder whether, in a wider perspective, romanticism and some forms of modernism are not twin mentalities rather than opposites.) Wittgenstein emphasized the autonomy of the artwork, contrasting it with the “meaningless” objects studied by the sciences. The artwork has depth in the sense that there is always more to be said about it. (Well, provided it is a *good* work of art.)

Phil Hutchinson and Rupert Read, in

“Grammar”, argue against the idea that grammatical rules, in Wittgenstein’s sense, can be thought of as imposed from outside. Rather, grammar is “always open to disputation, clarification and innovation” (p. 228). Grammatical claims are subject to the speaker’s consent: “Yes, that’s what I meant”, “Yes, that’s how I want it to be understood”. Their idea of consent, however, seems to be rather too speaker-oriented: we need to distinguish between what a speaker is trying to say and what, in a particular situation, she may be held to. Maybe their point could be restated by saying that questions of grammar (in Wittgenstein’s sense) are not external to what may be agreed upon between those engaged in a particular linguistic interaction.

An interesting feature of this collection is that here we find representatives of both the rival readings that predominate current debate on Wittgenstein: what we might term the therapeutic reading and the conceptual geography reading. The antagonism is manifest. Glock and Kalhat call the therapy view “irrationalist”, while Moyal-Sharrock talks about the “reductively therapeutic” reading of Wittgenstein. Hutchinson and Read, on their part, somewhat dogmatically present the therapeutic view as if it were the only available option. (They might have taken note, say, of the misgivings Rhees had about the connotations of the therapy metaphor.) I should declare that I feel much more affinity with the therapy conception than with the rival view, but I would not wish to deny that

much may be learnt from the conceptual geographers (rather the way Newtonian physics will be useful in a limited setting in spite of its having been superseded by Einstein).

The series preface, common to all the volumes, makes no attempt to capture what modernism might be. It is no surprise that in these essays the concept of modernism is far from a unified one, indeed it is hardly even coherent. The element of self-reflection cited by Matar is certainly one central aspect of the concept. Several contributors provide their own angles. Skorupski defends his linking modernism with mysticism by arguing that modernism embodied both a belief in technological progress and a recoil against this belief. Moyal-Sharrock suggests that modernism may be defined as a distrust of language, a characterization, she says, that may fit Cavell but not Wittgenstein. For Fasula, modernism is the overthrowing of tradition in the arts. According to Hagberg (p. 147), what Wittgenstein shares with a modernist sensibility in art and literature “is that we are inescapably in, and inextricably of,” language (which is hard to square with a deep mistrust of language, which presupposes that language is something that can be viewed from outside). According to Soulez, for Wittgenstein modernism signified a culture of individualism and fragmentation which he lamented. (Soulez interestingly points out that modernism in Viennese architecture stood for a responsiveness to human needs in contrast to the German *Neue Sachlichkeit*). Schalkwyk holds it to be a

modernist notion that form is as important as, if not more important than, content. Cormier, via Henry James, suggests that in abandoning romanticism literature was coming to be anchored in reality, whereas Ware and Macarthur emphasize the autonomy of the artwork. In the end, how one defines modernism does not matter much. In any case, this volume does do a great job of placing Wittgenstein in a context of European philosophical and extra-philosophical culture in the 20th century.

One final remark. Many of the writers blend together *Culture and Value* (which, by the way, is being referred to in Winch's 1980 translation, not his revised translation which appeared in 1998) with the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. Whatever one's view of the relation between the latter two works is, it seems clear to me that the philosopher(s) who wrote them should be clearly separated from the diarist whose notes were excerpted in *Culture and Value*.

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References

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