

Friedrich August von Hayek's Draft Biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Text and Its History
ed. by Christian Erbacher

Jack Manzi

Erbacher, Christian (ed.), *Friedrich August von Hayek's Draft Biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Text and its History*. With an afterword by Allan Janik. Leiden: Mentis, 2019. ISBN-13: 978-3957431578. 88 pp.

Friedrich von Hayek's *Unfinished Draft of a Sketch of a Biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein* was the first attempt at the task of assembling a comprehensible picture of the life of his pre-eminent cousin, Ludwig Wittgenstein. As the title might suggest, von Hayek never finished this task, his efforts being stymied by both Wittgenstein's literary executors and Wittgenstein's sister, Margaret Stonborough. Here, and for the first time, Christian Erbacher presents the first real publication of this draft, with accompanying commentary, and an afterword by Allan Janik.

Perhaps the best way to describe Erbacher's work here is as a 'biography of a biography'. His introduction to von Hayek's manuscript details the story behind its

creation, beginning with an outline of von Hayek's own relationship with Wittgenstein, and the parallels between their academic careers (von Hayek, like Wittgenstein, was also considered to be both leading light and subversive radical, except as an economist rather than as a philosopher). What follows is the chronicle of von Hayek's attempt to piece together the life of a distant cousin he barely knew, providing a contextual frame to the actual draft itself.

In doing so, Erbacher not only describes the history of von Hayek's sketch, but also the history of Wittgenstein-biography as a genre in itself. For what emerges from Erbacher's extensive work in researching the von Hayek sketch is

that, despite never coming to fruition itself, the work that von Hayek put into collecting the materials for writing a biography of Wittgenstein was hugely influential in all future endeavours of chronicling Wittgenstein's life. As Erbacher observes, von Hayek's biographical sketch can be said to enjoy a "second life" through the impact it had on the biographical works proceeding it: von Wright's sketch in 1955 made use of some of the material collated by von Hayek (1955), Brian McGuinness acknowledges a debt to von Hayek's work in his own *Wittgenstein: A Life* (1988: x), and Ray Monk too acknowledges von Hayek's sketch as a source for his own *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (1991: 641). The anecdotes, letters, and stories that von Hayek collated through reaching out to those closest to Wittgenstein after his death have proven to be a vital source of information in the task of biographing Wittgenstein's life.

This is where the real value of Erbacher's work lies. By this point, the content of von Hayek's draft ought to be familiar to those that have read the biographical literature around Wittgenstein, even if it hasn't itself been published until now. The actual draft itself doesn't reveal anything novel about Wittgenstein's life, although it does portray him in a surprisingly refreshing non-philosophical light, owing to von Hayek's lack of a philosophical background (something that may have contributed to the resistance from Wittgenstein's literary executors). Instead, what is novel is to be found

in Erbacher's own work in unveiling the history of von Hayek and Wittgenstein, and incidentally, the history – and politics – of Wittgenstein biography.

It's on this last point that Erbacher's commentary really shines, and perhaps deserves more attention. In Erbacher's delineation of the life and death of von Hayek's biographical work, what becomes apparent is the vested interests that different parties had in the portrayal of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's literary executors, Erbacher suggests, felt that any biography of their former teacher must be distinctly philosophical in tone (cf. 19). Similarly, Margaret Stonborough insisted that it had to be someone that knew Wittgenstein personally, and later praised von Wright's biographical sketch as a "beautiful memorial + a touching one" – the same sketch that was also praised by Charlie D. Broad for not being "a bare record of facts" but instead a high estimate of "Wittgenstein's personality and intellect and of his earliest and his later contributions to philosophy" (21, see also Broad 1959: 304). Broad's comments here are revealing of what it was that Hayek's sketch was seen to lack. It seems that everybody had an idea of what a biography of Wittgenstein *should* be like, beyond a simple re-telling of the facts of his life.

The question of the motives behind particular representations of Wittgenstein, and their effects on the reader, surfaces again in Allan Janik's afterword (cf. 83). Janik is chiefly concerned here with the resemblances

between Wittgenstein and Hayek (their upbringings, their family, and their respective academic careers) and how this may have influenced von Hayek's decision to write a biographical sketch of Wittgenstein. However, once again the issue of how Wittgenstein was perceived – “eccentric genius” and “idiot-savant” being the stand out phrases used here – comes to the forefront of the discussion, both in understanding von Hayek's attraction to writing this biographical sketch of his cousin and possibly in understanding the manner in which he did it (the “bare record of facts” that everyone who knew Wittgenstein seemed to dislike).

Naturally, this raises a significant issue about a trend in Wittgensteinian literature of using biographical details of Wittgenstein's life to explain and interpret parts of his philosophy. Most of the biographical details of Wittgenstein's life are collated and disseminated through biographies that in turn source their information from edited collections of excerpts from Wittgenstein's life (such as letters and diary entries and the like). Knowing that Anscombe and von Wright published edited versions of Wittgenstein's notebooks (NB) instead of von Hayek's biographical sketch on the grounds of *how* they portrayed Wittgenstein, one must ask whether or not such details are suitably ‘neutral’ enough to be used in the scholastic study of Wittgenstein's philosophy, or whether they too result in pictures of Wittgenstein's philosophical work that are skewed by a particular agenda.

Ironically, what makes Hayek's biographical sketch of Wittgenstein valuable then is precisely what Wittgenstein's family and literary executors disliked about it. It is written from a relative outsider's perspective and thus has no preconceived idea of Wittgenstein that it seeks to preserve, instead seeking to present the facts of Wittgenstein's life as they are. For this reason, this text should be of interest to anybody looking to do work in the supposed overlap between Wittgenstein's life and his philosophy.

References

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University of East Anglia, UK
Jfnmanzi @ gmail.com