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Review of

Tamás Demeter (ed.), *Essays on Wittgenstein and Austrian Philosophy: In Honour of J.C. Nyíri*, (Studien zur Österreichischen Philosophie, Vol. 38), Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi 2004. VIII, 320 pages, paperback. EUR 70.00 / US\$ 88.00. ISBN 90-420-0888-5.

It is a commonplace that Ludwig Wittgenstein is one of the towering figures of 20th-century philosophy. Orthodox 'Wittgensteinians' are a small minority, of course, but few other philosophers of the twentieth century have been so influential, whether directly or indirectly. Analytic philosophy, in particular, appears to be bound to his intellectual persona in a sort of hate-love relationship: Wittgenstein is the kind of thinker whose philosophy inspires passionate, even polemical disputes. Where there is passionate intellectual conflict, there is also the desire to defend one's ground by drawing clear boundaries and distinctions. Perhaps it is this desire which explains why, more often than not, the assessment of Wittgenstein as a singular philosophical figure is matched by a view that regards his philosophical positions – whether in the *Tractatus* or in the *Investigations* – as monolithic structures, which, though they may bear important *internal* relations, would profit only marginally from being placed in a broader context. To be sure, there exist important scholarly works that investigate the intellectual climate and its impact on Wittgenstein's philosophical development during his most formative years, but it seems safe to say that such attempts at historical contextualization have not had quite the impact they deserve. This is true especially at the level of systematic engagement with individual arguments in Wittgenstein's texts, where historical considerations are often given short shrift. Systematic interests may, of course, on occasion outweigh historical concerns, but the latter may provide an important corrective element – not least when it comes to interpretative issues or to assessing the overall thrust of Wittgenstein's project. The essays collected in the present volume make a valuable contribution towards connecting concerns of intellectual history with systematic goals.

The line-up of contributors to the present volume raises high expectations, and the collection as a whole manages to balance, in an almost exemplary way, different traditions and methodological perspectives. The twelve essays which, together with a preface by Ferenc Lendvai and an introductory essay by the editor, make up the volume, are organised into four parts of roughly equal length, the first of which surveys relevant methodological background

material and relevant philosophical positions of several of Wittgenstein's contemporaries. The subsequent three parts each present *prima facie* independent, yet often mutually complementary discussions of specific issues in relation to Wittgenstein's philosophy, as concerns both its general character and specific philosophical problems. Whereas most of the essays are written in English, the last part, consisting of papers by Wilhem Lütterfelds, Katalin Neumer, and Peter Keicher, is devoted to contributions in German – all of which, however, are preceded by summaries in English.

The first part of the book sets the scene, historically as well as analytically, for many of the more specialised papers that follow later in the volume. At the analytical end of the spectrum, Thomas Uebel ('Naturalism and Scepticism') maps out the domain of philosophical naturalism and locates Wittgenstein's position within the range of naturalist reactions towards the sceptical challenge to our entrenched world-view. Adopting Strawson's distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' naturalism, Uebel gives a lucid reconstruction of the structure of philosophical naturalism and ties 'hard' naturalism to the kind of scientism displayed by Neurath and Quine. Soft naturalism is then characterised by way of contrast: instead of the scientific tenet that radically sceptical questions cannot arise *within science*, soft naturalists argue that scepticism is 'idle' because it concerns, as Strawson puts it, 'original, natural, inescapable commitments which we neither choose nor could give up'.

In a more historical vein, Barry Smith and Wolfgang Grassl, in their paper on the character of intellectual inquiry under the political, cultural and intellectual conditions of the Habsburg Empire ('On Creativity and the Philosophy of the Supranational State') summarise, and expand on, Kristóf Nyíri's views regarding the origins of the specific intellectual creativity that manifested itself across many areas of academic and artistic endeavour in the supranational structure of the Empire. The intricate and unstable balance in terms of political power as well as in terms of cultural hegemony, which was maintained over several decades, is often blamed for the eventual failure of the Habsburg Empire as a state. However, it simultaneously provided its inhabitants with a comparatively tolerant cultural environment, which allowed for the 'fusion and re-fusion of entire reference systems (customs, languages, traditions, practices)' (p. 34). It is the resulting *enrichment* of systems of rules, the authors argue, which was of central importance to the creative character of cultural and intellectual life under the conditions of the Habsburg Empire, since it demanded, as well as encouraged, fluency and creative immersion in multiple systems of cultural representation – a challenge that was less pronounced in societies of more homogeneous nation states.

It is somewhat ironic that many of those scientists, artists, and intellectuals who are frequently quoted as examples of the peculiar conditions of creativity in the Habsburg Empire, only came to prominence after having left their home country. There are, of course, many different reasons for this, depending on individual circumstances, and whether or not the extent of this ‘brain drain’ was any greater in the Habsburg Empire than in other parts of Europe is an empirical question. In the history of science, at least, there has been some debate about this ‘Austro-Hungarian phenomenon’, and it does not take much to identify similar cases in the humanities. Lee Congdon’s article, ‘Arnold Hauser and the Retreat from Marxism’, examines one such case in detail. During the First World War, Hauser, together with his friend Karl Mannheim, actively participated in the meetings of the ‘Sunday Circle’, chaired by Georg Lukács, but started to move away when the Circle began to associate itself with the goals of the communist revolution. After a ‘nomadic’ period of time, during which they moved between Italy, Berlin, and Vienna, Hauser and his wife moved to Britain, where Hauser, at age 59, published his opus magnum, *The Social History of Art* (1951), to be followed in 1958 by *The Philosophy of Art History*. In the latter book especially, Hauser explores themes which are not all that far from concerns shared by Wittgenstein, such as the relation between individual and community, which he discusses most prominently in connection with his theory of the concept of “style”: while the existence of a ‘stylistic trend’ does not *determine* what an individual artist should do, a new style can only come into existence when it is adopted – gradually, and in a way that typically can neither be reduced to, nor explained in terms of, material conditions – by a community. In developing his theories, Hauser often helped himself to the vocabulary of historical materialism – yet, as his reaction towards the politicisation of the Sunday Circle shows, his relationship to politics was not an easy one. Whether or not the issue of politics troubled Hauser more than, say, Wittgenstein, must remain an open question. While there is no direct evidence that Hauser was influenced by Wittgenstein – his main influences were clearly Mannheim and Lukács – there are nonetheless striking similarities in their respective biographical trajectories, which suggests that there is much to be gained from inquiring into the relation between biography and philosophy.

Appraisals of the overall thrust of Wittgenstein’s philosophy are sometimes tied to interpretations of his philosophy as intrinsically ‘conservative’. As far as the inevitable political connotations of the term are concerned, such interpretations have led to a fair bit of controversy. While some commentators regard Wittgenstein’s (alleged) conservative agenda as a hindrance to social change and criticism of existing institutions, others view it as the

natural sign of an appreciation of the diversity of cultural practices. Either interpretation, however, must answer to the charge that it extrapolates beyond Wittgenstein's actual philosophical pronouncements. To be sure, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, he makes the claim that philosophy 'leaves everything as it is' – yet, at the same time, as von Wright puts it, he was 'much more anxious to combat and distance himself from a prevailing climate of opinion than to work for the restoration of one which was already fading'. The dynamic of these competing interpretations of Wittgenstein's conservatism, which already features prominently in the editor's introductory essay, is approached from a contrastive angle in David Bloor's paper, 'Ludwig Wittgenstein and Edmund Burke'. Bloor's motivation is not exegetical, in that he attempts to trace any direct influence of Burke's writings on Wittgenstein's philosophy; rather, he aims at identifying key ideas and themes in their respective philosophical positions that are in resonance, as it were. As Bloor admits, it may seem a 'curious and counter-factual' exercise to ponder the question of what Burke *would have* said if he *were* addressing the questions Wittgenstein was concerned with, but for heuristic purposes alone such an exercise may well be worthwhile. Indeed, despite their difference in motivation – Burke is overtly concerned with the defence of actual political institutions, whereas Wittgenstein critiques what he regards as the misconceptions of the academic philosophy of his time – both arrive at startlingly similar conclusions. In much the same way that Burke regards abstract political doctrines – such as the insistence on universal human rights that hold irrespective of social and historical context – as essentially misguided and a murky basis of social and political institutions, Wittgenstein regards abstract principles as the cause of much confusion in philosophy. Both emphasise the importance of conventions: the quest for further justification must come to an end somewhere, and practical acceptance of the way (some) things are, not rational reconstruction on the basis of theoretical principles, achieves just that. Wittgenstein, of course, takes matters one step further than Burke: Whereas Burke, for the most part, limits his considerations to the domain of political and social life – explicitly contrasting it with the domain of geometry and arithmetic, where the rationalism of 'abstract rules' is permissible – Wittgenstein does not shy away from extending his approach explicitly to the foundations of mathematics. As his remarks on rule-following make clear, problems of normativity do not acquire relevance in the social and political context only, but arise equally in the context of simple arithmetical rules. Whereas Burke, one might say, is concerned primarily with the political and moral value of *tradition*, Wittgenstein analyses the very foundation of the idea of 'tradition' – of what it means to 'go on as before'. The topic of rule-following is also discussed by Klaus Puhl in his contribution, 'Rule-Following:

Difference and Repetition’, where he attempts to forge a connection between the concepts of *performativity* (in its meaning-constitutive sense) and the Freudian concept of *retroactivity* (or *deferred action*, which retrospectively imbues an earlier act or event with causal significance).

Bloor’s strategy of contrasting Wittgenstein’s position with that of other intellectual ‘conservatives’, re-surfaces in several of the subsequent papers. Newton Garver, in his contribution (‘Beginning at the Beginning’), makes a suggestive comparison between Wittgenstein’s views and T.S. Eliot’s literary rejection of unrealistic – and ultimately misguided – ideas of progress. Garver, however, just like Bloor, is keen to point out that the conservative element in Wittgenstein’s philosophy should not be given a narrowly affirmative interpretation. The project Wittgenstein pursues, after all, is a *critical* one insofar as ‘[its] central thrust is against those who conceive philosophy as grounded (if it be grounded at all) in the foundational claims of epistemology’ (p. 150). In this respect, despite their many differences, Wittgenstein’s philosophy may be compared to Kant’s project of tracing the limitations of claims of knowledge. One way of setting out these limitations is in terms of *beginnings*, where a ‘beginning’ need not be understood in a narrowly temporal sense but refers to a legitimate starting point for a prospective philosophical project. Wittgenstein famously advertises his style of philosophy as continuous with the natural history of human beings (PI, 415). As Garver notes, any natural history must begin ‘with *acts* and *activities*’ – which in their most elemental form are, in Wittgenstein’s own words, ‘something animal’ – though, importantly, in the human case, these ‘are soon differentiated and refined through language’ (p. 141). Wittgenstein’s emphasis on language-games, and in particular on *noting their existence* rather than *explaining them theoretically*, thus can be seen to be a profound expression of his commitment to the primacy, for philosophy, of that ‘which no one has doubted’ and which has escaped remark only because it is ‘always before our eyes’ (PI, 415).

The use of the term ‘natural history’ in this context, however, is by no means unproblematic. It isn’t at all obvious why natural history – at least in its traditional sense as a subdiscipline of biology – should be regarded as providing precisely the right level of analysis for Wittgenstein’s project. On the contrary: Given that natural history is typically understood as an enterprise that has largely been superseded by modern biology and that can at best be retrospectively vindicated in light of the success of modern biology, it would seem to provide a rather shaky philosophical basis. Indeed, Wittgenstein himself suggests as much when he writes, elsewhere in the *Philosophical Investigations*, ‘we are not doing natural science, nor yet natural history – since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes’. Joachim Schulte, in his paper entitled ‘Readings of “Natural History”’, quotes this passage

and undertakes a thorough investigation of the different uses to which the term *Naturgeschichte* ('natural history') is put in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The picture that emerges is one that resists reduction to biology. In asserting that 'commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing', Wittgenstein, in effect, asserts that any account of human behaviour that did not recognise the former set of behaviours as on a par with the latter – and as requiring acknowledgment in their own right – would be incomplete. Natural history, on this account, is much closer to 'history in the story-telling sense' (p. 192) than to, say, evolutionary biology. Making sense of the great variety of specifically human practices may take the form of inventing 'fictitious natural history' and 'is not a question of the [actual] descent of one from the other', as Wittgenstein notes in his *Philosophical Occasions*. It is tempting to regard the legitimacy of fictitious natural history as stemming, at least in part, from the peculiarity of historical knowledge more generally. Wittgenstein's views on this matter are explored in Wilhelm Lütterfelds's paper. If it is indeed the case that historical facts, at any given point in time, only have reality insofar as they exist 'via a continued historical reconstruction, in the present, of an (individual or collective) "memory"' (as Lütterfelds summarises one aspect of Wittgenstein's position, p. 229; my translation), then *fictitious* histories may well fulfill a guiding role in this process of reconstruction.

Several of the articles give aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy an explicitly biographical twist. Thus, Jaako Hintikka identifies Wittgenstein's (purported) dyslexia as the 'demon' that haunts much of his writing on rule-following and, Hintikka claims, also on the foundations of mathematics. The evidence that Hintikka mounts in support of his thesis is certainly suggestive, though it is difficult to see how his hypothesis could be proved conclusively, given the difficulty of obtaining evidence beyond what is fixed in Wittgenstein's own writings or reported by friends and acquaintances concerning how he troubled himself about language. However, the idea that Wittgenstein's position, which has been described as a 'philosophy of post-literacy' (Nyíri), indeed owes something to a personal condition, should at the very least encourage further biographical research. One underexplored resource that one might draw on in this context, and for related questions, are the various forewords (and drafts of forewords) that can be found in Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*. A large number of these are made accessible, via extended quotations, in Peter Keicher's contribution. One example, which may be of significance in the context of the dyslexia hypothesis, is the preface to a dictionary that Wittgenstein had envisaged for use in elementary schools (*Wörterbuch für Volksschulen*, 1925) and in which he, interestingly,

laments the ‘laziness in thinking’ (*Denkfaulheit*) that arises when students habitually turn to teachers or fellow students for orthographic advice – especially given that information from the latter is ‘often wrong’. The prefaces and drafts also often provide concise statements of the overall thrust of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. For example, in keeping with his later scepticism towards merely asserted theoretical novelty, Wittgenstein, in 1930, criticises his own earlier work: in the *Tractatus*, he writes, it seems ‘as if discoveries were necessary in order to solve our problems’, when in fact such solutions can only be expected from a proper acknowledgment of ‘grammatical matters of course’. Given that Wittgenstein worked on, and returned to, these drafts over a considerable period of time, they can also be read as a running commentary to the changing intellectual climate – and to the development of Wittgenstein’s own views on history, politics and ideology – as, for example, when he views his project as lying outside the main current ‘of European and American civilisation’, whose commitment to the idea of progress manifests itself in the ‘industry, architecture, music, and the Fascism and Socialism of our time [=1930]’, all of which are ‘alien and disagreeable’ to Wittgenstein. While the prefaces and drafts may not display a high degree of systematicity – indeed, the difficulty of achieving systematicity is something that Wittgenstein repeatedly laments in these texts – they nonetheless constitute an underexplored resource, which no one with an interest in the development of Wittgenstein’s thought can afford to dismiss lightly.

Another theme that runs through several of the articles concerns the relation between words and images – and the role of other ‘media’ more generally – in Wittgenstein’s work. The use of diagrams in Wittgenstein’s own texts has often been remarked upon. By contrast, Katalin Neumer, in her contribution (‘Bilder sehen, Musik hören’), turns to Wittgenstein’s theoretical views on the function of – and our interaction with – pictures, both in general terms and when considered as instances of particular kinds of media, such as photographs and movies. His discussion of visual representations is then contrasted with remarks on other cultural ‘media’, such as theatre and painting. Whether Wittgenstein’s scattered remarks contain the nucleus of a distinctive media-theoretic position remains to be seen – Neumer herself is notably sceptical: as she sees it, Wittgenstein’s remarks lack the specificity that would be required for the development of such a position. Rather than speak of a lack of specificity, however, one could equally well speak of a high degree of continuity of philosophical questions across different media. On this account, the fact that Wittgenstein uses examples involving different media would merely indicate the universality of problems pertaining to representation and expression. A similar suggestion is made by Herbert Hrachovec who, in his paper (‘Picture This! Words versus Images in Wittgenstein’s

Nachlass'), argues that the main distinction be drawn not 'between words and pictures, but between language games (encompassing a whole number of possible signifying features)' (p. 208). A somewhat different suggestion is made by Rudolf Lütke, who attempts to read Wittgenstein's references to art and visual representation as not themselves part of the critical project of providing a 'critique of language' (if only by way of contrast); rather, Lütke seems to think, art opens up a new realm altogether – and with it the prospect of a 'new kind of philosophy [...] – one which does not concentrate so much on talking but, instead, on showing' (p. 176).

The volume under review was conceived as a *Festschrift* for J.C. (Kristóf) Nyíri on the occasion of his 60th birthday, and it is only fitting that the papers touch on many of the topics that Nyíri himself, over the course of his career, has contributed to in the field of Wittgenstein studies and the history of Austrian philosophy. Despite this diversity, the papers are held together by a number of interconnected themes, only a few of which I have been able to mention here. A much more detailed exposition is given in the helpful introductory essay by the editor, Tamás Demeter, who draws on Nyíri's oeuvre and reconstructs the latter's methodology as an 'exercise in the sociology of philosophical knowledge' (p. 1). David Bloor, in the paper discussed earlier, applauds Nyíri for not shying away from providing much-needed guidance, via his bold thesis concerning Wittgenstein's intellectual conservatism, 'in a field that is in no small danger of being overrun by pedantry and subjectivity' (p. 111). The present volume is a worthy tribute to this ambition.

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