Wittgensteins Vienna

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The center piece of attention is Wittgenstein, and more particularly his book - Tractus. Wittgenstein has usually been seen as a disciple of Frege and Russell, thus a man of the analytical philosophical school. The latter Wittgenstein, traces of which can already be seen at the end of Tractus, has thus been viewed as a renegade. In particular Russell so enarmoured of him as a follower and successor, was severely disappointed by the track he had eventually decided to follow. The thesis of the authors is simply that this preconception is misleading and hence ultimately puzzling. Instead one should see Wittgenstein not as an Anglo-Saxon philosopher, who just happened to be born and raised in Austria, but as an Austrian philosopher, marked by a different philosophical tradition, and who already had his philosophical ambitions formulated when he encountered Frege and Russell, and saw them, not so much as lights to be followed, as being in possession of analytical tools which he might use.

To fully explain their thesis they have decided to give a general introduction to the particular milieu into which Wittgenstein was born, namely that of the late Habsburg empire, a historical service, to which most of its readers will be attached. (When I read the book for the first time over thirty years ago, this is how I basically remembered it as well as profited from it.). The late Habsburg empire was a contradiction in terms, an ancient institution surviving into the breaking of the modern world. One which almost provides a parodoy of the high Victorian Age, with its sensous exulted idiom, its hypocrosy and moral and intellectual corruption and political bankruptcy. It was a hot-bed of intellectual ferment in which everybody knew each other, and in which intellectual debate was carried out in passion not in a spirit of cold specialized professionalism. Thus Wittgenstein was not only a philosopher, but dabbled as educator, sculptor and architect, not to speak of his not inconsiderable engineering skill. And the composer Schönberg was not only a path-breaking composer, but also a skilled painter and a brilliant essayist.

After the initial chapter describing the social setting drawing on the works of the historian Schorske, the grand opus of a Robert Musil and the personal recollections of a Stefan Zweig ('Die Welt von Gestern'), the point of departure is the critique of language as conducted by the journalists Kraus and Mauthner. Kraus conducted basically a one-man war against the establishment and its corruption of language and thought through his magazine 'die Fackel' to which he brought his entire talent of sarcasm and irony. To Kraus there should be a basic integrity between form and contents, thus not so much inveighing against forms as such, only when they were not backed by the appropriate sincerity, living as learning so to speak. Around Kraus, scorned by the establishment, there formed a loose circle of sympathisers. The architect Adolf Loos, like Kraus disgusted by the excess of ornamentation, promoting the view that form should spring from the function. In particular the chair should not impose a way of sitting as much as accomodate a desire of being seated. In particular the architectural style of Loos became associated with extreme

austerity, bringing to logical conclusions the simplifications of the Ringstrasse architect Otto Wagner. Mauthner took a more philosophical view, claiming that langauge was necessary for thought, and wanting to explore how language actually influenced thought. This being a tall program indeed and marred by the circularity, only partially acknowledged by Mauthner, of language itself being employed in the study of language.

It was the question of language, its possibilities, but above its limitations that intrigued the young Wittgenstein. Kant was of course an unavoidable predecessor in his positing a priori paradigms of thoughts (that of Euclidean geometry being one of his most unfortunate). One of the projects of Kant was to establish the basis for pure rational knowledge, in particular to rid philosophy of meta-physics, an ambition that has marked much of philosophy of the last two centuries that followed Kants demise. Kant observed that while science had progressed and becoming unique and consensual, metaphysics had not, each philosopher arguing for his own system in contradistinction from those of his colleagues. Schopenhauer, the master of literary form, was also a Kantian, and as such an implacable foe of Hegel, and much of his serious philosophy beyond the penning of aphorism, was devoted to the correction of Kant on some of his latter points, namely the rational ground for ethics. Schopenhauer argued along with Kierekgaard that ethics cannot be rationally justified, as exemplified by the latters injuction to take the leap into faith. Tolstoy can also be invoked, as the authors do, by his moral fables, trying to make points not by arguments but by example.

The fight against metaphysics and thus by implication what was science and the basis for unquestionable knowledge was particularly intense in the last decades of the 19th century. Mach a physicist turned philosopher was at the time a most celebrated proponent of what constitute hard scientific reasoning, especially that of physics. He also, like Loos in an entirely different sphere, advocated the predominance of function. The acquisition of knowledge being a pragmatic one basic for the business of survival, and through whose perspective it should always be seen. Mach placed special emphasis on the historical development of science, especially physics, and how certain key-concepts had evolved histoprically, i.e. fortuitously. The great disadvantage of Machs point of view was that he viewed things externally, thus positing an Archimedean fixed point out of which to conduct his criticism. A far more sophisticated appraoch was due to Hertz, who tried to look at things from the inside and thus to delineate limits intrinsically without the benefit from a high-faulting position. His notions of mathematical models have had lasting impact. He also noted that the controversy that accompanies concepts like force is simply due to confusion, the concept being loaded with extraneous associations to which there is no intrinsic connection. Another physicist of philosophical impact was Boltzmann, introducing in his studies of statistical mechanics, the concept of a phase space, namely the abstract realm of all possibilities.

Wittgenstein was in particularly influenced by Hertz and Boltzmann, of which the latter he must have come in contact with through his engineering studies. (The curriculum of a continental engineering institution being far more theoretical than an English or American one). Much of Tractus is indeed written in a no-nonsense style of propositional calculus, and in fact Wittgenstein is the originator of the truth-table [1] which may be seen

[1] something I must have read back then, but not at the time giving any lasting impression, until I

in the light of phase-spaces. But Wittgenstein was simply in the process of delineating the contorted contours of a small island, not to restrict himself to within it confines, but to charter the beginning of the surrounding ocean. Wittgenstein is famously remembered for his saying of what one cannot speak one must remain silent. Or that certain things (like the fables of a Tolstoy) cannot be said only shown. In particular Wittgenstein opposed the idea, proposed among others by Moore, that ethics could be rationally underpinned. Ethics was one of the matters on which rational language had to remain silent. The thrust of Wittgensteins point of view was thus that the most interesting aspects of philosophy were those matters on which one cannot speak, and as far as philosophy was restricted to what can be said, he had in fact solved its problem and resolved its paradoxes, and then he had logically retreated from the scene.

Meanwhile, what has become known as the Vienna Circle (*Der Wiener Kreis*) and logical positivists, pursued in the spirit of Mach an investigation of scientific inquiry, under the leadership of Schlick and Carnap. Wittgenstein was a model and an inspiration but he refused to have anything philosophically to do with the circle. A similar, less arrogant attitude was taken by Popper (not mentioned in the book), who made pains to dissassociate himself from the movement, much to the puzzlement of their proponents who thought that Poppers views were very close to their own, but apparently not the other way around. The reason for their failure to enlist a larger following was their in Poppers view over-emphasis on rejecting meta-physics, and in the view of Wittgenstein their concentration of what can be said and their rejection of what cannot. The academic development of philosophy, of which theirs could be seen as an illustration, was not something that appealed to Wittgenstein, feeling that as the discipline became established and specialized it became too technical, failing to address the real philosophical questions and instead concentraing merely on the technically doable.

The book is hardly sophisticated and based too much on secondary and tertiary sources (one does get an impression that much is studied from English translations of German originals) yet instructive in its simplicity. The last concluding chapters are verbiose, obviously trying to make some subtle points, but not really knowing what points, and as a consequence leaving the reader in the lurch.

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fairly recently encountered it again, greatly surprising me, believing it had a far longer historical pedigree