

## Filosofins Historia

### *Bolzano to Wittgenstein*

A. Wedberg

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In the last, and by the far the thickest, of the three volumes, Wedberg focuses his attention to a few central philosophers, namely those most closely associated with the project of finding formal languages. Thus he writes far more extensively on Bolzano than he did on Kant, spends a lot of time on Frege and Russell, and this of course makes sense. He is then committed to discuss Wittgenstein, but finds it convenient to split up this philosopher into two, namely the early and the latter, who in spite of being quite different (the older Wittgenstein explicitly disavowed the younger as he is articulated through his 'Tractatus'). More peculiar to the modern reader is his pre-occupation with Carnap, the proponent of the Vienna Circle and their logical positivists, whose program has been discounted by posterity. In addition, as more of an afterthought Wedberg also treats G.E. Moore, who certainly had a deep if marginal influence on Russell, and the Oxford language philosophers so close in spirit to the latter Wittgenstein. Wedberg is an analytic philosopher and would have no truck with people like Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre and others.

Why is Bolzano so great, and who would nowadays read his 2000 pages long *Wissenschaftslehre*? Wedberg obviously, and what does he find? He compares Bolzano's efforts favorably to that of Kant, adding though that Kant is after all more interesting. Bolzano may be far more clear and unambiguous, but a confusing jungle is after all more interesting than a well-lit garden with straight paths intersecting each other perpendicularly. In Bolzano we can discern the ambitions of Frege, be it in a more primitive form. With Frege the project of showing that the truths of mathematics are indeed analytic a priori in the terminology of Kant takes form. His goal is to base arithmetic on logic, and to do so he needs to create a perfect formal language. In order to do so he cannot avoid an analysis of ordinary language, making distinctions such as those between 'Sinn' and 'Bedeutung'. In order to do so he got logically involved in set-theory, the same theory that Cantor developed mathematically. It is hard not for a mathematician to claim that the mathematician Cantor's treatment of sets were far more imaginative than that of the logician Frege, as testified by his theory of cardinalities. It was the naive treatment of sets by the logicians that led to a paradox, not the instinctive one by the mathematicians. The paradox highlighted and named by Russell stopped Frege in his tracts, but of course the paradox itself was imminent in Cantor already<sup>1</sup> and one may wonder whether Russell derived it from a study of Cantor or whether it was an independent discovery<sup>2</sup>. The solution Russell

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<sup>1</sup> That the powerset has greater cardinality than the set itself is based on the diagonal trick, if applied to the set of all sets, you certainly get a contradiction, which when isolated turns out to be Russell's paradox

<sup>2</sup> Those ideas were in the air, and as such not too difficult, so it is quite likely that Russell did indeed

eventually came up with, namely the hierarchy of types, and which underlies his *Principia Mathematica*, is a bit puzzlingly presented by Wedberg. According to Wedberg types could not be mixed, and there is a hierarchy of empty sets, each one of them being empty as to a certain type (which provokes Wedberg to one of his few jokes). From a mathematical point of view such rigidity is counter-productive. Has Wedberg misunderstood something, or is the formalism of *Principia* even more artificial than I thought? Now the attempts to base arithmetic on logic must be considered a failure<sup>3</sup>, although the realization that it was took a long time to sink in, even after Gdel, who incidentally is only mentioned in passing if correctly. Russell must have realized so more or less immediately, even if his realization probably was of a more personal nature than a philosophical. The American philosopher Peirce claims that the integers are more basic than logic, and thus it is rather awkward in principle to base the former on the latter, which certainly was confirmed by the results of the efforts. The prose of *Principia*, if this is the proper term, is impenetrable, and Russell is forced to supply ad-hoc principles, such as the existence of the infinite. To base logic on the integers is a far more fruitful approach as Gdel showed. After *Principia* Russell gave up serious philosophy and became a professional philosopher often writing for a larger audience. Wedberg remarks that while Russell is known and lauded for the simplicity of his style, this is an artful deception. Unlike Frege and Bolzano he may be exhilarating to read, but if you read in order to be instructed not just entertained, it is far harder to understand what Russell really means compared to the other two, whose meanings will always become crystal clear after some patient scrutiny of their writings. Still it is clear that to Wedberg Russell is the most admirable philosopher of the 20th century, his efforts may seldom be successful, but they are always sympathetic.

To the modern reader the extended space allotted to the moribund attempts of Carnap seem puzzling. Carnaps ambition was similar to that of Russell and Frege, namely from logical atoms to build up an entire universe of truths, thus in particular characterizing the meaningless and metaphysical statements. Such an act does not seem to go beyond Solipsism (as Wedberg admits). of course Carnap only makes sense if placed in a context, namely that of the Wiener Kreis of the 20's. This movement of logical positivism was of course a very logical phenomenon in view of the fact of the great scientific advancement of the 19th century and beyond and the disenchantment with the metaphysical tradition of the same. It was done in the same spirit as the work by Frege and Russell, only extending the subject matter from elementary mathematics to all of science. The efforts were doomed in the very same sense as mathematical formalism, and by its dogmatism it shattered on its unrealistic ambitions. As Popper noted, logical positivism was based on a metaphysical assumption. Once again, the meta-comments on a system cannot be incorporated into the system itself. Both Popper and Wittgenstein were courted by the Vienna philosophers,

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hit upon it himself.

<sup>3</sup> The explicit definition of a number, proposed by Frege and taken up by Russell, is rather artificial, especially as a more elegant one, in the same spirit, was produced by von Neumann later. Which one is the 'true' definition of number? Surely those definitions should be taken as model interpretations, used to capture some of the logical properties of numbers, not finding them. It is indeed a deep misunderstanding of Platos ideas of forms to believe that there are canonical representatives, as if the Platonic heaven would be a Noahs ark.

but both stood aloof.

The younger Wittgenstein does not make sense without Russell and Frege, Wedberg comments. *Tractatus* may seem forbidding in its idiosyncratic and aphoristic style, as some surrealist parody of the Bible. But it makes perfect sense, and was not seen as a work of mysticism by his hard nosed colleagues. To the general reader it is another thing. The young Wittgenstein abandoned philosophy only to return to it a decade or so later. The older Wittgenstein renounced his earlier work. His interest became ordinary language itself, and it is eminently amenable to study through itself. Wittgenstein wanted to turn things upside down. Rather than having language express meaning and intention, meaning became an emergent feature of language games. Games devoid of meaning but following certain rules. Philosophy is just a chimera, the pointless occupation with tricks language plays on us. His mission, if that would make sense in the context of his philosophy, was to excoriate the ghost of philosophy in human intercourse. To Russell Wittgenstein trivialized philosophy into a parlor game. Anyway Wittgenstein had an influence on the emerging Oxford school of analytic philosophy, concerned with the subtleties and ambiguities of ordinary, natural human language. As Wedberg remarks, their works, brilliant as it may intermittently appear, were marred by a lack of systematization. It also, by abolishing the soul of meaning, tended to become rather behavioristic in its implementation.

Reading the concluding volume of Wedbergs philosophy one is left with a sad feeling that philosophy as we know it is dead. After a glorious awakening in the ancient world, and an exciting revival during the 17th and 18th centuries, the metaphysical excesses of the subsequent leading to a backlash of formalities degenerating into inanities. If you are a philosopher, why specialize in symbolic logic? Or points of grammar? Why not become a mathematician or a linguist instead? Is philosophy dead?

G.E.Moore, nowadays rather forgotten, is the last philosopher treated by Wedberg<sup>4</sup>. Moore played a decisive influence on Russell (and Wittgenstein?) through his being a stickler on precision. Many philosopher term him a plodder, always doing the most careful of analysis of sentences (How did he know when he was finished?). His philosophical credo was the reliance on common sense. But after all is said and done, do we need a philosopher for that?

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<sup>4</sup> excepting of course the sections added on the provincial schools of Oslo (Naess and empirical semantics) and Uppsala (nihilism of values)