

CRITICAL NOTICE

The New Wittgenstein, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read, London and New York, 2000, pp. v + 403, no price.

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This book, taken part by part, contains many good things. Its contributors are inspired or stimulated by the work of Cora Diamond and James Conant, philosophers of evident distinction. It is divided into two parts. The first covers Wittgenstein's work in general. Cavell discusses his vision of language. John McDowell and David Finkelstein his account of following a rule. Rupert Read contrasts his work with that of Kripke and Martin Stone with that of Derrida. Alice Crary discusses his philosophy in relation to political thought. The second part deals specifically with the *Tractatus*. Cora Diamond has two papers, one discussing the place within the *Tractatus* of the ethical and another on how this work anticipates the private language argument. James Conant and David Cerbone discuss Wittgenstein's relation to Frege. Hilary Putnam and Juliet Floyd discuss the philosophy of mathematics and Edward Witherspoon makes a contrast between Wittgenstein and Carnap. All the papers contain illuminating points. The paper by Rupert Read in the first section and those by Putnam and Cerbone in the second are especially notable for their clarity and liveliness.

But the book is intended to be more than the mere sum of its parts. Its aim is to clarify Wittgenstein's philosophy by setting it in a new light. The contributors are intended to reinforce one another in achieving this aim. There is one exception. With admirable disinterestedness, the editors have included, at the end of the book, one contributor who disagrees with the rest. Nor in choosing Peter Hacker for this subversive task did they pick on a man unable to give an account of himself. In a virtuoso performance, he assembles a mass of material – writings published and unpublished, notebooks,

lectures, conversations, memoirs – in order to show that in their interpretation of the *Tractatus* the other contributors are fundamentally misguided. What then is new about the new Wittgenstein? That evidently is the question to which we must turn our attention.

It has been common to distinguish sharply between the earlier and the later Wittgenstein. The *Tractatus* is seen as a work essentially metaphysical. In distinguishing between saying and showing, it allows that metaphysical truths, though they cannot be stated, may nevertheless be *shown*. By contrast, the *Investigations* entirely eschews metaphysics and concerns itself wholly with removing philosophical confusion. The aim of this book is to correct that view. Its contributors, with the exception noted, deny that the *Tractatus* is even covertly metaphysical. They hold that the distinction between saying and showing is not one that Wittgenstein himself advances; it is merely an instance of that metaphysical confusion which it is his aim to expose. Cora Diamond, for example, holds that the *Tractatus* can be properly understood only by paying close attention to what she calls its 'frame', the remarks in the Preface and at the end of the book. In attending closely to the frame, one realizes that the sentences in the work are not intended to express metaphysical truth but are strictly nonsensical, being intended to enact and therefore expose the nonsense which is typical of traditional philosophy or metaphysics. The sharp distinction between earlier and later Wittgenstein therefore disappears. On this reading, Wittgenstein has the same conception of philosophy in the *Tractatus* as in the *Investigations*. The editors call it 'therapeutic'. Wittgenstein's aim, in short, early and late, is to free us from traditional philosophy or metaphysics by exposing it as nonsense. What are we to make of this reading?

One effect, it seems to me, is that it makes Wittgenstein not more but less original than one might otherwise suppose. For example, the so-called therapeutic view has been a commonplace in philosophy for almost two centuries. It has its origins in the positivism of the nineteenth century. The positivists made an absolute distinction between what transcends and what is immanent in human experience. What transcends experience is unknowable and may therefore be dismissed. Experience is the source of all genuine knowledge, which is found, therefore, only in the empirical sciences. Philosophy they accommodated by giving it a negative role. Traditional philosophy or metaphysics is bogus, for it attempts to

provide positive knowledge whilst eschewing the only source of such knowledge, namely, sense experience. Philosophy, so far as it is genuine, does not even attempt to provide positive knowledge but confines itself to removing the confusions which have been inflicted on us by traditional philosophy or metaphysics. Its sole aim, in short, is to provide a therapy for thought which has become diseased. (We may note that such views are as common in our own day as they were in Wittgenstein's youth. For example, neo-pragmatists, deconstructionists, Heideggereans and Nietzscheans differ among themselves but they are as one in repudiating our philosophical inheritance.) These are the views which the new reading makes distinctive of Wittgenstein's thought. The effect, surely, is to make it indistinguishable from positivism.

In fact, the one element in the *Tractatus* which is strikingly original, for its period, is precisely the distinction between saying and showing. As we have seen, the positivists made an absolute distinction between what transcends and what is immanent in experience. What is striking about the distinction between saying and showing is that it undermines that dichotomy. In short, it distinguishes the transcendent from the radically separate. A transcends B, not when the two are radically separate, but when the one goes beyond the other. But the one cannot go beyond the other unless there is a relation between the two. Indeed transcendence is itself a relation. Were the two radically separate, out of all relation, the one could not transcend the other. It follows, since the two are in relation, that the existence of the one may be manifest in the existence of the other. In this way, Wittgenstein implies, the existence of what transcends experience may be manifest in experience itself.

The point is original, for its period, because when it is developed it undermines the whole philosophy of positivism. To see this, suppose that the ideal of the positivists has been achieved. Suppose, for example, that we can give an account of the world in terms of Newtonian mechanics and that this account is complete in the sense that no problem in Newtonian mechanics remains to be solved. Still we can see that reality transcends the world thus described. That is because, given only the world as represented by Newtonian mechanics, it is impossible to explain *how it can be represented by Newtonian mechanics*. Were there nothing but the world thus represented, there could be no intelligible representation of such a world. Nor, to see this, need we transcend the language of

Newtonian Mechanics. *For it shows itself in the language of Newtonian mechanics itself.* Wittgenstein's point was conveyed in classical philosophy through an analogy with light. Light transcends our seeing, since it is never an object of sight. Nevertheless its existence is manifest in our seeing, for without it we can see nothing at all.

Our contributors miss the above point, it seems to me, because they themselves approach the distinction between saying and showing from within the categories of positivism. James Conant, for example, says of those who take the distinction seriously that they are committed to what he calls the ineffability interpretation. They are committed, in short, to the view that there are metaphysical truths which are inexpressible in language but which can be grasped by processes of thought which elude the medium of language itself. He concludes that since this is nonsensical then so is the distinction between saying and showing. But that argument presupposes the very dichotomy which the *Tractatus* rejects. If by 'ineffable' Conant means radically inexpressible in language, the metaphysical truths of the *Tractatus* are not ineffable at all. For they show themselves precisely *in the use of language*. Indeed the more *rigorous* the use the more *clearly* they show themselves. The propositions of the *Tractatus* are not intended to indicate what eludes the medium of language but to direct our attention to what shows itself *in* that medium. That is how they are elucidatory. For example, should Wittgenstein say 'A is an object', we direct our attention, if we understand him, to what shows itself *in the use of the sign 'A'*.

Wittgenstein accepted the view, conventional for his period, that metaphysics is a form of a priori science and that traditional philosophers work exclusively in the mode of argument and proof. In this way they attempt to prove, let us say, the existence of external objects. On Wittgenstein's view, they are misguided or senseless in this, because what they want, so far as it is intelligible, will show itself in a perspicuous analysis of ordinary speech. It is perspicuous analysis not proof or argument which is the correct method in philosophy. Through this method we can reveal what is sound or confused in metaphysics. The point applies in criticism of positivism. For example, it is a striking feature of positivism that in its analysis of ordinary speech it is invariably reductive. Thus, on the positivist view, the truth of a statement about the past is constituted by its cohering with the available evidence. Perspicuous analysis will reveal that this is false not simply to metaphysical realism but to ordinary speech. Nor is that a coincidence, for ordinary speech is implicitly

realist. The metaphysical realist therefore strives to prove what he might easily have shown in a perspicuous analysis. Wittgenstein retained this view to the end of his life. For example, in *On Certainty*, he treats Moore as misguided or senseless in seeking to prove the existence of external objects. Moore is misguided or senseless because what he wants already shows itself.

My life shows that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on – I tell a friend e.g. ‘Take that chair over there’, ‘Shut the door’, etc., etc. (*O.C.* 7).

One is forced to add – once one is in this complaining mood – that our contributors in approaching the distinction between saying and showing neglect its background in earlier thinkers. In this, no doubt, they are consistent, for they hold that the history of philosophy is very largely a history of nonsense. The effect, however, is that they lack the perspective not simply to criticise but even to understand philosophical developments in the present or recent past. For example Schopenhauer’s influence on Wittgenstein is entirely neglected. A reader might be excused for thinking that Wittgenstein was influenced by no one apart from Frege and Russell. To illustrate this, consider the following remark by Cora Diamond. ‘When we read in the *Tractatus* that the world is *my* world, we should at least raise the question whether we are reading a criticism of Russell’s ideas about how knowledge by description enables one to pass beyond the limits of one’s own experience’ (p. 267). ‘The world is my world’ is in fact an almost direct quotation from Schopenhauer, as would have been evident to any philosopher of Wittgenstein’s generation. For ‘The world is my idea’ are the very first words of Schopenhauer’s most famous work.

Moreover a criticism of Russell is already implicit in Schopenhauer. For Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein alike it is senseless to speak of one’s sense experience as a limit to be transcended. That is because any intelligible analysis of sense experience will reveal that it *already* presupposes a world that transcends it. A world analysable purely in terms of sense experience could not be *my* world. For in pure sense experience there is no *me*. The subject disappears; it reappears only by contrast with a world that transcends it. That is why Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus* that solipsism, when properly analysed, will coincide with pure realism. In short, the realist does not need to disprove solipsism. He has only to analyse it. The result will be just what he wants: pure realism.

I must not suggest that our contributors are insensitive to the charge that they have assimilated Wittgenstein's thought with positivism. Several attempt to distinguish between the two. The most detailed attempt is by Edward Witherspoon. In a long and very able paper, he makes an explicit contrast between Wittgenstein and Carnap. He makes some excellent points *ad hominem*. For example he shows that Carnap's views are identical with those often attributed to the later Wittgenstein. But what then is the essential difference between Wittgenstein and Carnap? For Carnap, on Witherspoon's view, the rules of logic enable one to distinguish sentences which are legitimately constructed and therefore intelligible from those which are not. For Wittgenstein, by contrast, every sentence is legitimately constructed, for every sentence is intelligible. But here surely one becomes restive. For there seems nothing in the view attributed to Wittgenstein that Carnap need deny. He need only affirm that the rules of logic are constitutive not regulative. Their aim, in short, is not to distinguish some sentences from others but to frame what is constitutive of any sentence. As Hacker says, the rules even for non-logical concepts are constitutive rather than regulative. For example, two people who are illegally married do not enjoy a special form of marriage. They are not married at all.

In fact it is impossible to explain the essential difference between Carnap and Wittgenstein without invoking the distinction between saying and showing. Thus, for Carnap, one stipulates rules of logic in stipulating rules for constructing the sentences of a language. In short, logic or language can be explained as resting on convention. The view is in conflict with the very essence of Wittgenstein's philosophy. For him, rules of logic can be formulated only given a grip on logic which cannot be so formulated. Moreover the rules can be followed only by those who *already* understand what they indicate. But that is equivalent to saying that logic in the end cannot be stated; it can only be shown. In short, we invoke the very distinction which is supposed to be nonsensical.

We come at last to the dissentient voice of Peter Hacker. His paper is remarkable for the skill with which he handles a mass of material, in comparatively short space. Indeed as an exercise in destructive criticism it could hardly be bettered. Especially impressive, in the paper, is the evidence of those philosophers who knew Wittgenstein well in the period before 1930. Russell, Ramsey and Carnap, for example, have left on record their astonishment at discovering what

the *Tractatus* really means. What astonished them was not the logical doctrines, taken in themselves, for they were easily assimilated into the prevailing culture. The logical positivists, for example, were delighted by the idea that logical propositions are tautologies. Much less could they have been astonished by yet another attack on traditional philosophy or metaphysics. What astonished them was that Wittgenstein's views were entirely incompatible with the positivism which at first sight he seemed to profess. The difference between Wittgenstein and the positivists was forcibly expressed by Paul Engelmann, who derived his interpretation of the *Tractatus* from Wittgenstein himself. They agreed, says Engelmann, in drawing a line between what can be said and what we must be silent about. 'The difference is only that they have nothing to be silent about . . . Whereas Wittgenstein passionately believes that all that really matters in human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about' (quoted by Hacker on p. 373).

One soon notices, however, that Hacker's disagreement with the other contributors is not as great as one might have supposed. For he no less than the others dismisses the distinction between saying and showing. The disagreement is about whether Wittgenstein accepted that distinction in the *Tractatus*. The others say he did not; Hacker says he did. But they are as one in dismissing the distinction itself. That is a pity, for in my view it represents what is fundamental in Wittgenstein's philosophy and therefore marks the line of continuity between his earlier and his later work. Hacker himself holds the discontinuity thesis. The *Tractatus* is infected with metaphysics. It is a mark of the later work that it has been purged of such an infection. The distinction between saying and showing is an instance of what has been purged. Wittgenstein was delivered from this distinction, according to Hacker, when he realised that 'A is an object', for example, may be stated as a grammatical proposition, since saying covers a family of cases. The reader may recollect, on Engelmann's testimony, how passionately Wittgenstein believed in the importance of the distinction between saying and showing. It is not likely that a belief so passionately held should disappear on realizing that saying covers a family of cases and that 'A is an object' may figure as a grammatical proposition. The effect seems altogether disproportionate to its cause.

Moreover let us consider what is involved in a grammatical proposition. 'A is an object' is plainly uninformative to someone

who is familiar with the use of the sign 'A'. To someone unfamiliar with such a sign, it must be unintelligible. One may inform a person about a certain kind of object by means of a description. But in doing so one will draw on his knowledge of other objects. One cannot in that way inform him of *what it is for something to be an object*. The child learns that as it learns to speak, or it does not learn it at all. In short, grammatical propositions are entirely parasitic on what shows itself in language; their function, indeed, is to draw our attention to what shows itself there. In effect we have the same distinction between saying and showing. For grammatical propositions are no less parasitic on what shows itself in language than are the propositions of the *Tractatus*. The only difference is in the label. Hacker may say that his label is clearer than Wittgenstein's. But that is not so certain. The view that we may state the grammatical rules of language is very easily taken in the Carnapian sense and then in an instant we are holding that language or logic is explicable in terms of convention. That is the exact opposite of what Wittgenstein believed.

In any case, the distinction between saying and showing is evident at any number of points in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The discussion of following a rule is an obvious example. The rule for a sign is senseless except to one who is capable of applying that sign. Any rule for its application would itself have to be applied. We must conclude, on pain of an infinite regress, that the application of signs is prior to any statement of rules. In stating rules for language, we soon fall into silence and then we are left with what shows itself in the use of language itself. We have already mentioned *On Certainty*. In that work we may sense the presence of the distinction on every page. Moreover in the course of his remarks, Wittgenstein all but explicitly endorses his earlier distinction.

Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it (O.C. 501).

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