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The Trouble with W*ttg*nst**n

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«Neither with you nor without you»
François Truffaut, *La femme d'à côté*

No one can deny that there is a problem between Wittgenstein and analytic philosophers. To put it mildly, there are tensions between Wittgenstein's and Wittgensteinian styled reflections and the views and practice of a lot of contemporary analytic philosophers, such that they often seem to be strange bedfellows, when they are bedfellows at all. Of course we know that Wittgenstein did not get along very well with Russell, the logical positivists, and many of his contemporaries. But the present sources of tensions are not so easy to locate, and different philosophers have different diagnoses. I am interested in confronting my own with Diego Marconi's¹.

One might think that the trouble with Wittgenstein is that his philosophy and his attitudes, which in many ways were opposed to those of his times, have been themselves highjacked by the spirit of the age. There are many facets of this phenomenon, some superficial, some deeper. Although Wittgenstein is mainly, in Elisabeth Anscombe's words, a philosopher's philosopher², he has become an icon of popular philosophical culture, a character of novels, plays and movies, whose sayings are written on tee-shirts or voiced in rock songs³. Although he has permanently advocated the values of *Aufklärung*, an ethics of intellectual

¹ A radical account of these tensions is P. Hacker's *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1996). I have already expressed in various places some of my doubts about certain Wittgensteinian views. See e.g. Engel, *Philosophie et psychologie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, Italian transl. by Elisa Paganini, *Filosofia e psicologia*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000.

² E. Anscombe, "Wittgenstein: whose Philosopher", in A.P. Griffiths (ed.), *Wittgenstein, Centenary Essays*, supp. 28 to *Philosophy*, Royal Institute of Philosophy, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, 1-10.

³ To see the twist of attitudes, see for instance a recent review of the *Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. J. Gibson and W. Huemer, Routledge, 2005, which begins thus: "Frege is a philosopher's philosopher, and Bertrand Russell was every shopkeeper's idea of a sage; but Wittgenstein is the philosopher of poets and composers, novelists and movie directors" (TLS 29 May 2005).

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modesty, and the virtues of honesty and seriousness in philosophy his name has become associated with philosophical trends which are at the antipodes of his actual positions and of his style – there is a Heideggerian Wittgenstein, a buddhist Wittgenstein, a post-modernist Wittgenstein, a deconstructionist Wittgenstein, etc. At the time of writing this article, I have not yet found Wittgenstein's name under the entries of encyclopaedias, *web sites* and *blogs* on Continental Philosophy, although I expect its appearance at any time. But in many ways this is unavoidable. For we live at the time of the appropriation of high culture by the *medias*, which have the capacity of transforming anything belonging to the realm of the intellect into sheer bullshit. In this sense almost any philosopher whose concerns speak to the general public can fall victim of the appropriation of pop culture. Wittgenstein himself had diagnosed a phenomenon of which he himself in the end fell victim: the appropriation of philosophy by the spirit of the age⁴. A lot of philosophers feel compelled to accept positions which concur with the attitudes and prejudices of their times (e.g. relativism). Of course an increasing number of philosophers, most often outside the Academia or at its fringes, have been tempted to start a career, and sometimes have achieved a successful one, as representatives of Cheap Wisdom; but even those who try to find refuge within the more and more fragile Ivory Towers of the Academia and who refuse to have anything to do with the manifestations of the *Zeitgeist* find themselves at some point kidnapped by it. But Wittgenstein alone cannot be blamed for this, even if some of his attitudes may have created this sort of misunderstanding. This has happened to many other philosophers and even those who might not be suspected of compromise with fashion and easy philosophy can't escape this phenomenon⁵. So this cannot be the problem with Wittgenstein, for it is a problem for every philosopher today.

Another source of the difficult relationship which exists between Wittgenstein and contemporary analytic philosophy is the well known fact that there are at least two Wittgensteins. Dr Ludwig, on the one hand, is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, philosophers of the XXth century. He is one of the founders of analytic philosophy, and his *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* have set the agenda for whole schools of philosophy. His logical atomism, his views on logic and on the *a priori*, his conceptions of meaning, understanding and rules, the private language argument, his conception of the mind, of the nature

⁴ For an excellent diagnosis of Wittgenstein's attitude to his times, see J. Bouveresse, "The Darkness of this time: Wittgenstein and the Modern World", in A.P. Griffiths (ed.), *op.cit.* 11-40, and his collection of essays: *L'époque, la mode, la morale, la satire, Essais, II*, Agone, 2001.

⁵ Admittedly this cannot easily happen to Carnap or to Quine, but one can see how it could happen to Davidson, Lewis or Kripke. See e.g. a poetic celebration of Lewis's metaphysics by Jacques Roubaud, *La pluralité des mondes de Lewis*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, and Robert Morris' paintings «with Davidson», ("Writing with Davidosn, Critical Inquiry", 1993, French transl. by P. Engel, «Ecrire avec Davidson», in *Cahiers du musée d'art moderne*, Paris, Centre Pompidou, 53, 1995. These works, and a lot of philosophical journalism are samples of *bullshit* in Harry's Frankfurt's sense: they exploit philosophical views for aesthetic purposes which are alien to any concern for their truth.

of necessity, and many other of his analyses form the background of discussion of much of contemporary analytic philosophy. His style of questioning is always incisive, he has a unique capacity for reinventing traditional philosophical problems and for making these seem new and exciting. In other words, Dr Ludwig is a philosophical genius, whom no serious philosopher can afford to ignore, to whom one feels compelled to react, and in any case whose views have a deep relationship with analytic philosophy. Mr Wittgenstein, on the other hand, is a quite distinct figure. His views about philosophy are more destructive than constructive. He believes that there are no genuine philosophical problems, that most of them are the products of obnoxious mythologies and that the philosopher's main task consists in uncovering these mythologies and in curing the illusions of philosophical understanding. Although Dr Ludwig expresses himself clearly, or at least aims at clarity (he even proposed the slogan that the main task of philosophy is the clarification of thoughts), Mr Wittgenstein's views need a lot of exegesis before they can be properly evaluated, and quite often one gets the impression that Mr Wittgenstein's obscurity is a mask for a new kind of dogmatism, one which discards any sort of philosophical view except the view that there cannot be any philosophical view. To paraphrase Ramsey, Mr Wittgenstein tries to whistle what he claims cannot be said. In this sense Mr Wittgenstein sets himself apart from a lot of contemporary analytic philosophy. Some people say that Dr Ludwig and Mr Wittgenstein are two different individuals, corresponding roughly to the *Tractatus* period up to the nineteen thirties, and to the "second" Wittgenstein's career from his return to Cambridge until his death. Others say that they are one and the same individual, and some others that there is a "third" individual, a "New Wittgenstein", Mr Super-Duper Wittgenstein, whose views of philosophy were therapeutic through and through, from the *Tractatus* onwards.⁶ If *distinguos* are needed, we might say that all these Wittgensteins, old or new, compose the philosophy of W*ttg*nst**n⁷.

The problem with Wittgenstein, however, is not that there is a tension between WI and WII, which may be resolved by the discovery of a WIII or of some W₀. Here too the problem affects a lot of others philosophers, who have suffered similar multiple personality crises: is the Plato of the first dialogues the same as the Plato of the *Sophist*, or the Plato of the *Laws*? Is the Russell of the *Principles* the same as the Russell of the *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*? How many Putnam's are there? Everyone is free to have his own version of what-Wittgenstein-really-said, and it is a matter of Wittgensteinian scholarship whether one version is the correct one or whether they are all, in one sense, acceptable. And everyone is free to prefer his own Wittgenstein. A number of philosophers, e.g. Russell, the positivists, Popper, and many contemporary metaphysicians, have

⁶ See e.g. A. Crary and R. Read (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein*, Routledge, London, 2000, J. Bouveresse, S. Laugier et J.J. Rosat (eds.), *Wittgenstein, Dernières pensées*, Agone, 2002.

⁷ In 1919, Philip Jourdain wrote *The philosophy of Mr B*rrr*nd R*ss*ll*, Open Court, Illinois. I have to say that in my view the best commentator on the philosophy of Mr W*ttg*nst**n is St*nl** C*v*ll.

confessed their preference for WI, and a number of others, e.g. Strawson, many post-war Oxford philosophers, and many contemporary anti-metaphysicians have expressed their preference for WII.

What sets Wittgenstein apart from a lot of contemporary philosophy is a group of metaphilosophical views or conceptions which have come to be associated to his name, and in particular the following:

a) *anti-scientism* : philosophy is not a science, and cannot be one. It must not find inspiration in science. All attempts by philosophers at trying to imitate scientific methods are vain.

b) *anti-theory*: philosophy cannot and should not propose theories or theses. Its role is purely therapeutic. The best that it can propose is a new, more adequate way of seeing things, but nothing which looks like a philosophical *proposition*.

c) *metaphysical quietism*: metaphysical disputes, especially those which bear on realism and anti-realism, are empty and senseless.

d) *anti-formalism*: the use of formal methods in philosophy, mathematical or logical ones, is both illusory and obnoxious.

e) *anti-academism*: philosophy is not a profession, and it does not flourish within academic circles. It is a way of life, and it should show us the way to live – even if it need not say it.

Those views, individually or collectively, are neither exclusive of Wittgenstein nor distinctive of him. A number of continental philosophers hold them (for instance they can be ascribed to Nietzsche, to Derrida and to a number of post-modernist writers), and a number of analytic philosophers unhappy with mainstream analytic philosophy such as Putnam and Mc Dowell have held similar views. Needless to say, some analytic philosophers have held a subset of these views: for instance Carnap's neutralism accepts versions of (b) and (c) (although of course Carnap accepted formalism and a certain sort of scientific conception of philosophy), and Paul Horwich is a clear contemporary representative of c). It is obvious, however, that much of contemporary analytic philosophy goes against these views, in particular with respect to c). Let us imagine that Ludwig Wittgenstein rises from the dead and goes to an Eastern APA meeting or to an ECAP conference. It is not very difficult to predict what might happen, give what we know of Ludwig's reactions. With mild amusement first, but slowly with an increasing irritation which ends up in cold wrath, he hears talks about four-dimensionalism and presentism, Bradley's regress, mind-body supervenience, dialetheism and bivalence, truth-makers, indexicals and modality, epistemic modals, contextualism and minimal propositions, externalism and Twin Earth, cognitivism in ethics, etc. In the end, unable to control his moods, he bursts out and causes a scandal, insulting loudly the speakers and their audiences, threatening them with his walking stick, and APA officers have to expel him from the big Hilton ballroom in which the symposium was held. It is obvious that the recent

revival of speculative metaphysics within analytic philosophy goes against much of what Wittgenstein was after. One thesis which Wittgenstein has always held is the thesis of the impossibility of philosophical propositions and in particular of metaphysical propositions. In this respect the current rebirth of metaphysics since Kripke and Lewis, and in general the unrestrained use of metaphysical “intuitions” that is practiced in much contemporary writing would probably be judged negatively by Wittgenstein himself and has been judged severely by many philosophers in various degrees inspired by him, such as Putnam, Rorty, or McDowell.

But this is not the only respect in which mainstream analytic philosophy has drifted away from Wittgensteinian wisdom. Twenty years ago Anthony Kenny bitterly remarked: “The experience of the last decade has been chastening for those who think that Wittgenstein’s work is important and should be more widely appreciated. The philosopher’s influence seems to be declining rather than increasing... This is not because his work has been superseded or put in the shade by the light of some succeeding philosophical genius. Rather his contribution has been neglected because more and more philosophers, especially in the United States, have been tempted to model their studies on the pattern of a rigorously scientific discipline, mimicking the that type of precision characteristic of mathematics, and holding up a general theory of linguistic as an ideal for the philosophy of language, and an abstract system for artificial intelligence as the goal for the philosophy of mind”⁸. Kenny talked mainly of the enterprises of building systematic theories for the semantics of natural languages which occupied a lot of British and American philosophers at the time, but also of the “cognitive revolution” in the philosophy of mind. It is not so clear that new styled contemporary analytic metaphysicians would be ready to call their inquiries “scientific”; on the contrary many of them are happy to insist upon the continuity between it and “old” styled “grand” metaphysics⁹. But Kenny is right to say that many of these developments go against much of contemporary theorizing. The same could be said about a lot of influential work in contemporary philosophy, not simply in metaphysics. Although it would take more time and space than I can devote here, much of the work of philosophers like Jerry Fodor, Daniel Dennett, Ned Block, John Perry, Gareth Evans, Christopher Peacocke, Kit Fine or Timothy Williamson goes against views that are associated with Wittgenstein: some of these philosophers believe that there can be a causal and scientific understanding of the mind, some that there is thought without language, some that there are non-linguistic *a priori* truths, and others that there are real essences.

But what’s wrong with disagreeing with these philosophers, and arguing instead that a causal understanding of the mental is misguided, that non linguistic thought does not exist, that *a priori* truth can only be a matter of grammar, and

⁸ A. Kenny, *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1984: vii-viii

⁹ See e.g. D. Zimmerman’s preface to the vol. 1 of *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004.

“essence is revealed by grammar” only? Nothing of course, provided that the defense of these claims is argued for and sustained by a substantive philosophical argument. And of course the fact that Armstrong, Fine or Williamson said that P is no guarantee that P. It would be absurd to reject Wittgensteinian views because they do not belong to the kind of claims which are fashionable within today’s analytic philosophy. This brings us closer to the misgivings that I have with a number of exegeses of Wittgenstein’s writings and of Wittgenstein-inspired discussions. Many of these discussions are problematic because they are unargued, and proceed through a subtle version of the argument from authority. Very often they take the following, form (although I do not claim that they conform to this single mould):

- (i) Philosopher(s) so-and-so claims that P
- (ii) But P is an instance of a mythological view M which Wittgenstein has long ago denounced in his writings
- (iii) Hence P is false, or misguided
- (iv) But do not expect me to claim that not-P, or to defend another view, Q; philosophy does not propose any thesis, it consists only in the cure of philosophical illnesses

Examples from the philosophy of mind are familiar enough. For instance if a philosopher claims that there are mental, events or states, he will be suspected at once of falling prey to the myth of hidden occurrences and processes characteristic of the Cartesian picture of the mind, which, everyone knows, is the main target of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology. A lot of Wittgensteinian criticism of cognitive science is inspired by this kind of post-Wittgensteinian (and post-Rylean) denunciation of category mistakes. Much of Vincent Descombes’ book *La denrée mentale*, which is mostly an attack against contemporary philosophy of mind as “mentalististic” proceeds in this manner. He starts by remarking that the mentalist’s acceptance without discussion of the existence of mental phenomena is not as innocuous as it seems:

D’abord, le dogme mentaliste nous est présenté comme étant d’une extrême banalité : comme s’il équivalait à la simple reconnaissance de l’existence d’une dimension psychologique des affaires humaines. Qui irait nier que les gens aient des opinions et des désirs, sinon le personnage démodé du behavioriste borné dont tout le monde se moque ? Quel obscurantiste irait refuser l’intérêt pour la psychologie des recherches neurologiques ? (...) Qui refuserait la platitude : les gens agissent en fonction de ce qu’ils croient savoir et de ce qu’ils veulent obtenir ? Mais au bout du compte, le lecteur a la surprise d’apprendre qu’en accordant ces vérités peu contestables il a accepté les uns après les autres les éléments d’une métaphysique de l’esprit.

D’où vient qu’on se pose le problème philosophique des processus et des états mentaux, et du behaviorisme ? Le premier pas est celui qui passe entièrement inaperçu. Nous parlons de processus et d’états, et laissons leur nature indéterminée ! Un jour, peut-être, nous en saurons plus à leur sujet – pensons-nous. Mais par là même, nous nous sommes engagés dans une façon déterminée de traiter le sujet. En effet nous avons un concept déterminé de ce que cela veut dire que d’appren-

dre à mieux connaître le processus. (Le pas décisif du tour de passe-passe a déjà été fait, et c'est justement celui qui nous a paru innocent.)¹⁰

In other words, as soon as one has postulated that mental states and processes cause our actions, one accepts that there is some hidden essence of these states, which functions causally like an inner Cartesian mental substance. The mythology is now in place, and it is easy from there to pin down the Cartesian confusion behind all this. But this kind of “argument” depends, in the first place, at step (ii) on the correct categorisation of view P as an instance of mythology M. Let us accept, for the sake of argument, that the mythology in question *is* a mythology or a conceptual mistake. In the above example, it is not obvious that talk of mental states implies the existence of a hidden substance or property. The view that “there are” mental states and that they explain causally behaviour is compatible with a Davidsonian interpretationist or a Dennettian instrumentalistic conception of the mind, and it does not imply that there are any real states or processes hidden behind. Neither does it imply that these states and processes are inner and not public – for an interpretationist or an instrumentalist mental concepts *are* public, and they are such because they are theoretical concepts of the same sort as “weighs 10 kilos”¹¹. In other words before pronouncing that a given view P is an instance of a mythology M denounced by Wittgenstein, one must check that P is the right instance of the mythology M. How can we be so sure that view such and such is a clear case of mythology M? This depends very much upon how the de-mythologiser uses Wittgenstein’s “morphological method”: “I lay down the games as such, and let them spread their clarifying effect upon the several problems” (Wittgenstein, *Big Typescript*, p.202)¹². The morphologist has to be a good physiognomist to be able to recognise a myth or a confusion on its face. If he is bad at recognising faces, (s)he will see mythologies everywhere. In the second place, the strategy at step (ii) depends upon the particular exegesis of Wittgenstein’s texts which are supposed to debunk the mythology. In some cases, the text speak for themselves, in others it is not clear what Wittgenstein is really after, and a lot of unfolding of the buried insight is necessary. This is where the argument from authority comes in. If one is a good interpreter of Wittgenstein’s texts, if one makes them speak properly, one can extract the appropriate diagnosis of the mythologies of philosophical understanding. Here much of Wittgenstein scholarship is not far from the kind of hermeneutical and textual reverence which have been denounced as characteristic

¹⁰ Vincent Descombes, *La denrée mentale*, Paris, Minuit, 1995, English transl. *The Mind's Provision*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

¹¹ The point is well made by Angsar Beckermann, «Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism and the Contemporary Philosophy of Mind», in A. Coliva and E. Picardi (eds.), *Wittgenstein Today*, Bologna, Il poligrafo, 2004: 290.

¹² On this method, see Diego Marconi’s comments in D. Marconi (1997), in “Transizione”, in Marconi (ed.), *Wittgenstein*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1997: 59-101 and especially Marilena Andronico, *Antropologia e metodo morfologico. Studio su Wittgenstein*, Napoli, La Città del Sole, 1998.

of a lot of German and French speaking philosophy¹³. Steps (iii) and (iv) are a matter of delicacy. Exposing a philosophical confusion or classifying a view as an instance of a familiar mythology is not the same thing as *arguing* against the view which it exemplifies (in the case in point, a certain Cartesian conception of the mental). The Wittgensteinian here, like the Pyrrhonian sceptic, is cautious not to *affirm* anything. He is just showing or displaying a confusion and its sources, and making it manifest without endorsing any rival view on the matter. For instance because Wittgenstein exposes the confusions associated with the Cartesian picture of the mental and emphasises the dispositional character of many mental concepts, he is not subscribing to any sort of behaviourism or to any sort of radically externalist conception of the mind. On the contrary, Wittgenstein, many interpreters tell us, is undermining the very distinction between internalism and externalism about the mind, between the “inner” and the “outer”. He is not replacing one mythology by another¹⁴. At this point Wittgensteinian exegesis looks very much like Derridean deconstruction: the scaffolding of a supposed fragile building is exposed, but no attempt is made to build another one. He is not, in agreement with thesis (b) above, proposing any sort of theory, but just trying to correct our misguided pictures, which all arise from our selecting one – in general the most metaphysical – conception at the expense of the other, and letting our language go on holiday.

I find Wittgenstein’s and his followers’ claim not to propose any sort of theory in philosophy baffling. Not simply because philosophical understanding seems to me to be a kind of theoretical understanding and because this discipline does not seem to me to have much worth unless it at least *attempts* to formulate theories and propositions of a certain kind (which is not the same as actually giving ones, but even to fail is to fail *at* something). But also because Wittgenstein, and not simply in his *Tractatus* period does seem to propose various sorts of views, philosophical propositions, and theories. In spite of the “Neo-Wittgensteinian” view that the *Tractatus* does not put forward metaphysical doctrines and only attacks the assumption that we require such doctrines, it does seem to me that there are some philosophical theses in the *Tractatus*, which are actually discussed as such within contemporary philosophy¹⁵. The following at least seem to me to be more or less theses which have been defended by Wittgenstein throughout his career: (a) necessity and a priority are wholly a matter of meaning, of concepts and of “grammar”, (b) there is a fundamental distinction between causal explanation and reason explanation (c) there are no ethical propositions, (d) logical rules are rules of grammar, not descriptions of facts, (e) there is no substantial self, (f) language and grammar are autonomous, and do not answer to any metaphysical

¹³ See Barry Smith, “Textual Deference”, in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 28: 1, 1991: 1-13.

¹⁴ See e.g. S. Laugier “Esprit, mind”, *Methodos*, 2, 2002.

¹⁵ See e.g. B. Skyrms, “Tractarian Nominalism”, *Philosophical Studies*, 40 (1981): 199-206, reprinted as an appendix of Armstrong’s *A combinatorial Theory of possibilities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

reality. There are many other such theses that one can ascribe to Wittgenstein, about following rules, the nature of mathematical proof, or about meaning and intentions. One essential thesis is that all propositions or truth bearers are contingent and that so called non-contingent props are rules¹⁶. Notoriously, such theses are difficult to formulate and to ascribe without all sorts of qualifications to Wittgenstein, and as soon as a commentator attempts such a formulation, he is immediately accused of misunderstanding or at least of oversimplification¹⁷. As soon as, to give a famous example, one ascribes to Wittgenstein the view that meaning is use, or that meaning is a matter of rules, or actually any sort of view about meaning, one is reminded that he actually said that meaning is use “for a large class of cases”, that he did not try to capture any essence of meaning, nor to defend any (sceptical or not) thesis about following a rule, etc. Nevertheless, it is possible also to find in Wittgenstein writings, with the help of some reconstruction, something like arguments. But what is an argument for, if not an argument for a given thesis? Many Wittgenstein commentators, however, will insist that these are not properly speaking arguments, but suggestions, intimations, or strong pressures to think that, etc. In any case views like (a)-(f) are not “metaphysical” or “theoretical” theses, but pronouncements about the meaningfulness of our use of various concepts. If these are theses, they are wholly conceptual theses, not metaphysical ones, about reality, the mind, or any super-reality. As Peter Hacker says:

Philosophy is not an extension of science. It is not a kind of conceptual scullery maid for the sciences, as Locke supposed. Nor is it superior to the sciences – a super-science of all possible worlds, to be investigated by means of ‘thought-experiments’ from the comfort of the armchair, as contemporary revisionists suppose. (Thought-experiments are no more experiments than monopoly-money is money.) It is, as Kant intimated, *the Tribunal of Sense*. So: back to the linguistic turn. The aim of philosophy is the clarification of the forms of sense that, in one way or another, are conceptually puzzling – for they are legion. The charge of philosophy – a Sisyphian labour, to be sure – is the extirpation of nonsense. There is, Heaven knows, enough of it, both in philosophy and in the empirical and a priori sciences. The prize is not more *knowledge* about anything. Rather it is a proper understanding of the structure and articulations of our conceptual scheme, and the disentangling of conceptual confusions¹⁸.

If one takes this motto seriously, the task is indeed Sisyphian. What seems to be left to philosophy is the extirpation of nonsense. Should one be a presentist or a four-dimensionalist? Nonsense! Are there any contingent *a priori* propositions?¹⁹ Nonsense! Are beliefs mental states, dispositions, feelings? Nonsense!²⁰

¹⁶ Thanks to Kevin Mulligan.

¹⁷ See e.g. Mc Ginn’s laudable, but admittedly failed attempt in *Wittgenstein on Meaning*, Oxford Blackwell, 1984.

¹⁸ ‘Analytic Philosophy: Beyond the linguistic turn and back again’, in M. Beaney (ed.), *The Analytic Turn: Analysis in Early Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology*, London, Routledge, 2006.

¹⁹ P. Hacker, *ibid.*

²⁰ P. Hacker, “The ontology of Belief”, in Mark Siebel and Mark Textor (ed.), *Semantik und Ontologie*, Frankfurt, Ontos, 2004: 185-222.

The result, most of the time, is as boring as Derridean deconstruction²¹. Is there a contemporary version of the debate between psychologism and anti-psychologism? Nonsense. There is no “philosophy of psychology”, since the abandonment of the mythology of mental states is the realisation that the mind exists only *within language*²². Is there a dispute between realism and anti-realism? Nonsense²³. Should we accept or reject the sceptic’s stance about human knowledge? Nonsense!²⁴ This is not even ping-pong; it is as if one tried to play ping-pong with someone who keeps the ball each time you throw it.

Wittgenstein’s quietism creates a familiar problem, which he himself confronted with the famous § 6.54 of *Tractatus* (“throw away the ladder after he has climbed up”), and later. Once we have renounced the point of view from which issues such as realism/ anti-realism in various domains, epistemological questions about justification, or the nature of ethical properties, make any sense, are we going to revise our conceptions and proceeds to a new point of view – a new form of realism or anti-realism, a new kind of epistemological standpoint, a new form of expressivism in ethics, etc.? To do so would amount, in Cora

²¹ The *rapprochement* is not mine but James Conant’s («Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense», in T. Cohen, P. Guyer and H. Putnam, eds., *The Pursuits of Reason*, Lubbock, Texas Tech University Press, 1992) and commented upon by P. Hacker “Was he trying to whistle it?”, in Cray and Read (eds.), *op.cit.*: 359.

²² See e.g. S. Laugier: « Comme l’a montré Cavell dans *Les Voix de la raison*, la perspective de Wittgenstein n’est pas une simple négation de l’existence des états mentaux, mais une réinvention des problèmes psychologiques, leur reformulation en questions d’usage du langage, d’appartenance à une communauté de langage. Mais qu’est-ce que cela veut dire ? Pourquoi l’usage ou la communauté ne seraient-ils pas interprétables en termes de psychologie ? Tout le travail de Wittgenstein consiste à montrer que ce n’est pas le cas : qu’il n’y a *rien* d’autre que l’usage, au sens strict, que ce que nous cherchons est *là*. Nous croyons – nous, c’est-à-dire les philosophes et les psychologues – trouver la solution aux problèmes de la psychologie (savoir ce que nous *voulons dire* par « je pense », « il croit », « il a mal ») dans des concepts comme ceux d’état, d’esprit, de processus, de croyance, qui nous paraissent éclaircir la question et ne font que nous barrer la route. » («*Mind*, esprit, psychologie», *Methodos*, 2, 2002, and « Dépsychologiser la psychologie », *Revue Philosophique*, 124, 3, 1999: 363-385).

²³ « Le réalisme métaphysique soutient qu’il existe des arguments convaincants qui permettent de répondre aux sceptiques et aux idéalistes et de conclure que la réalité, et particulièrement ce que le sens commun considère comme étant la réalité existe bel et bien ; une position métaphysique est nécessairement, pour Wittgenstein, une position théorique. Ce qui, selon lui, engendre la métaphysique, c’est la volonté de théoriser au delà de la science, de continuer, avec les moyens du même genre que ceux de la science, mais dans un autre domaine. Une position métaphysique se présente sous la forme d’une thèse, ou d’un ensemble de thèse. Mais une défense du réalisme sous forme de thèses est précisément, pour Wittgenstein, tout aussi dénuée de sens que ce que disent les idéalistes et les solipsistes. Si on a adopté l’attitude qu’il préconise, on n’a adopté aucune thèse métaphysique particulière: on a simplement adopté un mouvement qui est plutôt de l’ordre d’une conversion du regard, on a réussi à voir les choses d’une manière tout à fait différente et c’est à cela que conduit le travail philosophique » (Jacques Bouveresse, *Le philosophe et le réel, entretiens avec Jean Jacques Rosat*, Paris, Hachette, 1998: 39-40).

²⁴ Sandra Laugier, in « Le sujet de la certitude » (in Bouveresse, Laugier and Rosat, eds., *op.cit*) suggests that Wittgenstein’s only apparently deals with the traditional question of scepticism. He really deals with the question of the expression of the self in such sayings as “I know” or “I believe”. The epistemological problem disappears in front of the problem of the nature of the “voice” which speaks when I say “I”.

Diamond's terms, to "chickening out"?²⁵ Not to chicken out, according to her, would be to accept "to throw away in the end the attempt to take seriously the language of 'features of reality'" and in the end to take it as "real nonsense" and "let it go". Maybe what cannot be said cannot be whistled, but it cannot be whispered either. But as Leontes says in *The Winter's Tale*: "Is whispering nothing?" (I, ii, 284). One way or another, we might be tempted to suggest that even the traditional problems and solutions which are said to be thrown away are still important, and that the nonsense which Wittgenstein criticises still has a sort of intrinsic value²⁶. Did not Wittgenstein himself oscillate between saying that all philosophical problems are nonsensical and that there is nothing better than a real problem of philosophy? If the traditional philosophical categories and problems are idle, why do many Wittgensteinians insist on callig their views "realist", "naturalist" or "sceptic" nevertheless?²⁷

I am aware that many of the qualms that I have voiced here will obviously have *un air de déjà vu*. It will be objected that they apply only to radical forms of Wittgensteinianism, and not to more modest or reasonable forms. I am afraid, however, that a lot of Wittgensteinian writing today fits the complaint that Crispin Wright addressed a few years ago to McDowell's style in *Mind and World*:

If analytic philosophy demands self-consciousness about unexplained or only partially explained terms of art, formality, an explicitation in the setting of argument, and the clearest possible sign posting and formulation of assumptions, targets and goals, etc. then this is not a work of analytic philosophy²⁸.

In his response to Wright, McDowell bites the bullet, in admitting that there is no need to conform to such standards:

If analytic philosophy prohibits imagery except of rare special effect and precludes letting the full import of a term (such as, perhaps, "spontaneity") emerge gradually in the course of using it, as

²⁵ Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1996, "Throwing away the ladder": 181. See also James Conant, "Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein", in Cray and Read 2000, *op.cit.*: 174-217.

²⁶ J. Bouveresse, *Préface* to Bouveresse, Laugier and Rosat (eds.), *op. cit.*: 17.

²⁷ C. Diamond talks of a "realist spirit", and S. Laugier follows: "Dire que tout est dans l'usage, cela veut dire, nous l'avons vu de toutes sortes de façons, qu'il n'y a rien d'autre dans ce que nous disons, et rien à quoi mettre en accord notre langage et nos usages. Repousser l'échelle du *Tractatus*, et cette fois pour de bon, ne pas se « dégonfler », pour reprendre le mot de Cora Diamond - c'est comprendre cela. On voit ainsi pourquoi la perspective du langage ordinaire et de ses accords immanents, si on la tient jusqu'au bout, est une perspective antimétaphysique,, radicalement. On pourrait l'appeler aussi, encore une fois : « réaliste », au sens où Diamond parle d'« esprit réaliste » (*Du réel à l'ordinaire*, Paris, Vrin, 1999: 148). Jacques Bouveresse himself declares : « J'ai toujours considéré Wittgenstein comme un réaliste , au sens le plus clair du terme, comme quelqu'un qui n'a jamais été tenté par cette idée que le langage ne réussit pas vraiment à entrer en contact avec une réalité indépendante de lui. (*Le philosophe et le réel*, *op. cit.*: 42). I must confess that I do not see how this can be a form of realism, unless the meaning of this word reduces to something incredibly thin. For a sober analysis of the reasons *not* to take Wittgenstein as a realist, see William Child, "Wittgenstein and Common-Sense Realism", *Facta Philosophica*, 2, 2000: 179-202.

²⁸ C. Wright, "Human Nature", *European Review of Philosophy*, 1996, 4: 253, repr. in N. Smith (ed.), *Reading McDowell*, Routledge, 2002: 140-159.

opposed to setting down a definition at the start, I do not care if I am not an analytic philosopher. Likewise if analytic philosophy requires the kind of argument that aims to compel an audience into accepting theses. In fact I see no reason why this should be taken to be marks of the genre. Of course explicitness and clarity are another matter. I wrote as explicitly as I knew how²⁹.

If the idea here is that what is needed before all is shared good will between participants in a philosophical discussion and sincere desire to be clear and explicit, and that the “canons” of analytic style can often be cumbersome and useless (we all have the experience of reading boring analytic papers who define to death each thesis and sub-thesis, and argue for any detail, but miss the point), then one can perfectly agree with McDowell, and Wright’s qualms are not in order. In other words, there may be standards of analytic writing, but it may also be good, judicious, and important not to conform to them strictly or mechanically in some cases. And we all know a lot of what passes for analytic philosophy which is unclear and inexplicit. But if McDowell actually believes that there are *no such standards* as those that Wright here puts forward, in particular that there is no need in philosophy to promote any thesis, to try to argue for it and to defend it, then the disagreement is deep. For Wright’s requirements are not simply rules of philosophical politeness. They correspond to genuine standards, which are backed by cognitive norms and values³⁰. There is no indication in McDowell writings, that he believes, like Richard Rorty, that these standards are empty or useless, on the contrary³¹. But it is clear that actually respecting these standards becomes more difficult if one believes that philosophy is not in the business of formulating any sort of thesis or theory. The temptation to simply whistle the tune becomes strong.

I hasten to say that this temptation, however, is not one which a lot of Wittgenstein-inspired philosophy has indulged in. A number of writers who develop Wittgensteinian themes care a lot for formulating theses, sustained by careful argument, and *at a proper distance from Wittgensteinian exegesis*. By which I mean that they address problems directly, without going through a kind of hermeneutical exegesis, try to formulate answers and theories, which are inspired by Wittgenstein but which do not necessarily take what he says at face value. Much of these writers are genuine and important contributions to analytic philosophy, including when they are critical of it. Let us call this kind of style *sober* Wittgensteinianism. Sober Wittgensteinianism has more to do with Dr Ludwig than with Mr Wittgenstein, or more with Wittgenstein than with W*ttg*nst*n. To name only a few, Crispin Wright’s work seem to me a model in

²⁹ J. McDowell, “Responses”, in Smith, *op cit.*: 291.

³⁰ Or so I have argued in *La dispute*, Paris, Minuit, 1997, and “Analytic Philosophy and cognitive Norms”, *The Monist*, 1999, 82, 2. See also my response to C. Chauviré and S. Laugier accusation of *moralizing* about cognitive values (P. Engel and K. Mulligan, “Normes éthiques et normes cognitives”, *Cités*, 14, Paris, PUF: 171-186).

³¹ See e.g. Rorty’s response to Jacques Bouveresse, pp. 154-155, note 3, in J.P. Cometti (ed.), *Lire Rorty*, L’Éclat, Combas, 1992, and my exchange with Rorty in *A quoi bon la vérité?*, Paris, Grasset, 2005, English transl. *What use is Truth?*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007.

this respect, and much of the work of Malcolm Budd, Bill Child, Hans-Johann Glock, Jacques Bouveresse, Mathieu Marion, and Diego Marconi, seems to me to belong to this group. Sober Wittgensteinians do not philosophise *after* or *according to* Wittgenstein, but *from* Wittgenstein, and they do not set the stage of their discussions as if they were mainly commenting upon Wittgenstein. They do not hesitate, when they think it fit, to defend theses. Even if their views – e.g. with Wright – sometimes flirt with quietism, they do not take quietism as a sort of end point of philosophical enquiry.

Diego Marconi's many contributions to philosophy are in my mind, among other things, models of sober Wittgensteinianism. In addition to remarkable work of Wittgenstein scholarship³², he has engaged in straight discussion and philosophical theorizing. His book *Lexical competence*³³ is one of the most interesting investigations in the topic that I know, where the balance of philosophical argument and empirical research are set at the appropriate level. In constructing a *theory* of lexical competence based on the contrast between the referential and the inferential role of expressions, Marconi is moving away from current Wittgensteinian orthodoxy at least in two ways. In the first place, he eschews the purely descriptive stance adopted by most commentators of Wittgenstein and formulates a conception of semantic competence which aims to be explanatory (and if possible causally explanatory). In the second place, he does not hesitate to defend this theory at a properly naturalist (psychological, even neurophysiological) level.

Many friends of Wittgenstein believe that a) his views are wholly incompatible with any sort of naturalistic, causal and scientific conception of the mind, and b) that his considerations about mental concepts and the “philosophy of psychology” defuse in advance the very enterprise of cognitive science by revealing the philosophical confusions on which it is based. Much as been written on Wittgenstein's relation to science, and even the most ardent upholders of the view that philosophy is a completely *a priori* discipline which deals only with the grammar of our concepts agree that Wittgenstein was not opposed to science and to the scientific understanding of phenomena but mostly to various forms of scientism and of essentialist metaphysics which he saw as continuous with scientism³⁴. He was, however, always absolutely clear on the fact that scientific and causal understanding could not be confused with the kind of understanding which is fit for human phenomena in general. But it is one thing to argue for this kind of divide, and another to consider that *any* sort of causal facts is completely irrelevant to any sort of analysis of mental concepts such as meaning, understanding, having an intention, etc.

³² See e.g., besides his monographies, D. Marconi, “La Grammaire philosophique”, in J.P. Leyvraz and K. Mulligan (eds.), *Wittgenstein analysé*, Nîmes, Chambon, 1993: 64-98.

³³ *Lexical Competence*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1997.

³⁴ See e.g. W. Golpharb, “Wittgenstein, Mind and Scientism”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 86, No. 11, Nov., 1989: 635-642.

In *Lexical Competence* and in his introductory book on philosophy and cognitive science³⁵, Diego Marconi shows that this is not right, at least for a vast range of phenomena having to do with semantic understanding. The book as a whole seems to me a very fit answer to criticisms such as Hacker and Baker's against formal semantics and the psychological theories of linguistic understanding³⁶. But I want particularly to express my agreement with a recent article on Peter Hacker's attack against Marr's theory of vision, where Diego Marconi shows that his debunking of Marr's work as a theory of vision is misguided³⁷. Hacker is fond, like many other radical Wittgensteinians, of the "category mistake" criticism of much work in cognitive science³⁸. According to them, cognitive scientists try to account for phenomena like understanding, thinking, meaning, seeing or hearing by showing that there are causal processes, located in the brain, which are at the basis of these states and capacities; but it is not the brain or some sub-part of it which thinks, means, understands, sees or hear, it is *us*, humans or ordinary people. Therefore, Marr's theory is not a theory of vision (or, for that matter, any modular theory of linguistic understanding). "Category mistake!" *Et voilà!* Diego Marconi calls this "the wrong subject argument". He reveals its form:

Theory T, purportedly of property P, treats P as a property of entities of kind K. However, P is not a property of such entities: for any $e \in K$, $P(e)$ is unintelligible (ungrammatical, strongly inappropriate, a category mistake, etc.). Therefore T is not a theory of property P.

This kind of argument has been used *ad nauseam*, and the first celebrated example of it was Malcolm's analysis of *dreaming*³⁹. But, as Marconi points out, it is a non-starter. Hacker and others state without argument that understanding, seeing, hearing, etc. are properties of the animal as a whole, not of one of its parts. It is true that we never *say* that a brain thinks or sees. But unless one believes that "everything is in language", the answer to this question has nothing to do with how we speak. It is an empirical matter whether the brain, or some of its parts, performs understanding or seeing. Wittgensteinians have also another type of

³⁵ *Filosofia e scienza cognitiva*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2001.

³⁶ See P. Hacker and G. Baker, *Language, sense and Nonsense*, Blackwell, Oxford.

³⁷ D. Marconi, "Can there be a Scientific Theory of Vision? Hacker against Marr", in Coliva & Picardi (eds.), *Wittgenstein today*, *op.cit.*: 319-337.

³⁸ This kind of criticism is virtually the only weapon that Descombes (*op. cit*) directs against cognitive science. C. Chauviré applauds with enthusiasm: « La conception anthropologique et holiste de Wittgenstein... qui privilégie « l'homme entier » auquel seul sont attribuables les prédicats mentaux – on ne saurait les attribuer à quoi que ce soit de subpersonnel – a le mérite d'empêcher la décontextualisation, voire la déshumanisation de la philosophie de l'esprit qu'implique certains travaux cognitivistes (Fodor) » ("La philosophie est-elle soluble dans la science? Le cognitivisme en question", *Revue Philosophique*, 2, 1999: 286-87).

³⁹ N. Malcolm, *Dreaming*, London, Routledge, 1959. I have always found it surprising that Putnam, after having given a very thorough criticism of Malcolm's views (repr. in his *Collected Papers*, II, Cambridge, 1975), went on to accept similar Wittgensteinian arguments against cognitive science.

argument to the same effect: the criteria for phenomenon P (e.g. seeing) are not the same as those for its purported causal underpinnings C (e.g. the mechanism of vision), therefore the P and the C have nothing in common. Although Marconi leaves this implicit, it is a variant of the classical “logical connexion” argument for the strong conceptual division between reasons and causes. But as Davidson has shown a long time ago, this argument misfires: from the very fact that criteria or descriptions of P differ from criteria or descriptions of C, it does not follow that P and C are different. Causal mechanism of vision may well have something to do with vision even though our criteria for seeing differ from out criteria for recognising the mechanisms. I shall not deal with Marconi other criticisms of Hacker’s views. He shows in my view convincingly that *if* these are Wittgenstein’s arguments against the import of cognitive science in explaining mental phenomena, then these arguments fail. Hacker’s reconstruction and use of Wittgenstein’s arguments is, however, committed to a very sharp distinction between conceptual (grammatical) matters and empirical ones. If, as some Wittgensteinian passages suggest (e.g the famous § 97 of *Über Gewishheit* about the river and its bed), the divide between empirical matter and “grammatical” ones is not as strong as some other passages seem to say, then the so-called irrelevance of causal facts to understanding, meaning, or seeing has to be reconsidered. As, as Diego Marconi reminds us, if a Wittgensteinian philosopher holds that there is nothing deeper than “facts about our natural history”, why should our natural history have nothing to do with causal facts about our nature?⁴⁰

Diego Marconi’s analyses, on this point and on others, reveal something important about sober Wittgenstianism⁴¹. The sober Wittgensteinian acknowledges that the morphological description which is supposed to lay down the conceptual knots and confusions actually *does not solve* the philosophical problem at hand. On the contrary, for the radical Wittgensteinian, the description *does* make all the work: once you see “übersichtlich” what’s going on there, everything is laid to rest, you can, as James Conant says “throw it away”, or as Malcolm learnt to Ludwig, “leave the bloody thing alone”, and go fishing. But for the sober Wittgensteinian, the chasing of category mistakes does not solve the difficult problem of how to reconcile causal facts and meaning facts, the natural and the normative, and other such conundrums. To give another example: Crispin Wright’s work in *Truth and Objectivity* and elsewhere shows that the realist/anti-realist disputes are not solved once one simply says that there is “harmony” between language and reality and there is nothing outside language. One does not simply get rid of the realism issue by calling the therapeutic attitude “realism”, as Cora Diamond and others stipulate. On the contrary, Wright indicates a framework for realist/anti-realist disputes (his minimalist syntacticalism) *from which* one can formulate these disputes. One may or may not (and I myself do not) agree with

⁴⁰ See Diego Marconi, “Quine and Wittgenstein on the science / philosophy divide”, ms (URL = <https://hal9000.cisi.unito.it/wf/DIPARTIMEN/Discipline1/Professori/Diego-Marc/Quine.rtf>).

⁴¹ Thanks again to Kevin Mulligan for having pointed this out to me.

the framework, but it is essential to note that these disputes have *not* come to an end. So the sober Wittgensteinian admits the autonomy and irreducibility of many basic philosophical problems. He accepts, in other words, a bedrock analytic attitude: problems and theses do not change very much, but strategies and methods to deal with these problems and theses change, and there can be progress in this sense. In other words, the sober Wittgensteinian is not (really) a Wittgensteinian!⁴²

The moral of all this should be clear, if not platitudinous. This kind of Wittgensteinian considerations cannot serve as a basis of a sort of *Transcendental Dialectics* whereby the “dialectical illusions” of cognitive understanding would be revealed. I suspect that the same moral could be drawn from other domains, such as the philosophy of logic and mathematics. Of course everyone will say that this applies only to radical Wittgensteinianism (of which “New Wittgensteinianism” is only a part), but not to sane, sober and reasonable use of Wittgenstein’s writings for philosophical enquiry. But once we agree with this, nothing is settled, and one has to confront directly and squarely the main questions: is metaphysics possible? Are there philosophical propositions? Are there *a priori* principles? We cannot rest content with a kind of Kantian Wittgensteinianism which gives at the outset a negative answer to the first two questions and a positive one to the third. It is not obvious, to say the least, that there cannot be any philosophical knowledge, and that it has nothing to do with metaphysical and scientific knowledge. But the opposite view is not obvious either. Contemporary philosophy has an urgent need to rework completely our usual accounts of the division between analytic and synthetic, *a priori* and *a posteriori*, conceptual and empirical. This kind of work has already begun. It may, or it may not go along lines which Wittgenstein has explored. But there is no reason to believe *a priori* that it will. *Amicus Ludovicus, magis amica veritas.*

⁴² A further, and quite interesting question is: if radical wittgensteinians really believe that cognitive science, logical semantics, contemporary ontology are based on the gross confusions that they point out, why do they insist in writing so many new books and papers on it? Shouldn’t they just admit that once the mythologies are laid down to rest, they themselves go out of business? But apparently they don’t, and, if they are not simply self deceived, I take it as an indication that they obscurely feel that they have not solved the philosophical problems.