

# Wittgenstein: Mind, Meaning and Metaphilosophy

Edited by  
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# Wittgenstein

## Mind, Meaning and Metaphilosophy

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# Introduction

Pasquale Frascolla, Diego Marconi and Alberto Voltolini

There is little doubt that interest in Wittgenstein's philosophy has been declining in the last 20 years. This is particularly true with analytic philosophers, who had regarded him as one of their founding fathers together with Frege and Russell. However, while Frege's writings are painstakingly investigated and Russell's paper *On Denoting* is commented upon line by line, nowadays few read *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, although the voice it represents in the early twentieth-century debate on the nature of language, logic, and mathematics could hardly be disregarded. As to the 'later' Wittgenstein, the author of *Philosophical Investigations*, for most of today's young American philosophers he represents a paradigm of bad philosophy, to be confined to the despicable company to which Dewey and Heidegger also belong.

In recent times, the rejection of Wittgenstein by the analytic mainstream may have been accentuated – *a contrario* – by the relative success of so called 'New Wittgensteinians,' the interpretive trend represented by Cora Diamond, Jim Conant and others, who tend to overemphasize the opposition between Wittgenstein and the dominant style of analytic philosophy (beside putting forward rather bizarre exegetical claims). Thus Wittgenstein comes out as the monopoly of an embattled, yet insular minority, which provides everybody else with an additional reason for forming a bad opinion of him.

One must admit, however, that such an opinion had been around before. More and more often, Wittgenstein had been seen as needlessly cryptic, rambling, neurotically incapable of philosophical professionalism (of which inability he would have been proud, one must say). The views he had defended, to the (limited) extent that they were judged intelligible, were mostly rejected: there is no categorical distinction between reasons and causes, indeed, reasons *are* causes (Davidson);

the domain of the mental is only indirectly connected to public behavior, such a connection having no conceptual import; a private language is perfectly possible, and the arguments by which Wittgenstein rejects it should be thrown into the crowded garbage can of verificationism (Fodor). A whole discipline – cognitive science – was born by choosing as its field of investigation a domain of entities about which Wittgenstein believed that almost nothing could meaningfully be said. And one should not forget how insistently it is repeated that philosophy is not specially about language (though it is not always specified what it is about, instead).

Sometimes, one has the suspicion that the two parties – the Wittgensteinian and the anti-Wittgensteinian – are simply talking past each other. Did Wittgenstein reject a private language in the very same sense in which it is countenanced by Fodor? Or – to point towards an altogether different subject – does Quine's rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction *eo ipso* dispose of Wittgenstein's distinction between grammatical and empirical propositions? Even when no misunderstanding is in question, is the rejection of Wittgensteinian views – such as the distinction between causes and reasons, or the idea of an intimate link between a mental state and its manifestation – ultimately grounded in convincing arguments, or is it merely a matter of philosophical fashion?

Aside from such theoretical disagreements, important as they are, the main reason for the present rejection of Wittgenstein's thought may hinge on the sociology of academia no less than on philosophy. Wittgenstein consistently claimed that philosophy is an activity aiming at clarifying our thoughts, dismantling the traps into which language makes us fall all the time, and (consequently) dissolving philosophical problems. Although there is a conspicuous debate on whether he himself suffered from a form of self-deception on this concern, he indisputably maintained that in philosophy there are no theories: the urge to produce philosophical theories is born of a misunderstanding of the relation between philosophy and science, and whatever theories are produced are constantly wrong. By contrast, today's analytic philosophy is intensely theory-oriented: Kripke's *theory* of reference and Rawls's *theory* of justice are paradigms of philosophy. Every young philosopher dreams of becoming a celebrity by solving one of the canonical philosophical problems by way of a brilliant theory.

Wittgenstein opposed the spirit of his philosophy to that characterizing 'the great stream of European and American civilization to which we all belong', which 'issues in the construction of ever wider

and ever more complicated structures'. There is little doubt that, in today's Anglo-American philosophy, the construction of structures takes center stage: ever more complicated, though perhaps not always wider structures. To the extent that it is reflected in academia, 'the great stream of European and American civilization' focuses on the scientific paper, specialized journals, referees, competition among theories and among the personalities with which they are identified. Whatever their strictly cultural merits, such practices facilitate job and resource allocation, they confer identity and make philosophy inherit part of the prestige that goes with the hard sciences. That is why this is the dominant model, even for philosophers. Now, for all such things Wittgenstein would have felt deep horror. Was he right, wrong? Could it be that he was partly right and partly wrong? Can a sober evaluation be applied to the claims Wittgenstein apparently put forth, by investigating more neutrally than it was done in the past whether at least some of them still resist philosophical criticism?

With these ideas in mind, in Spring 2006 we organized in Reggio Emilia (Italy) a conference on 'Is There Anything Wrong with Wittgenstein?' We invited to the conference some eminent commentators of Wittgenstein's philosophy as well as some contemporary philosophers who, independently of whether they can be regarded as 'Wittgensteinians', have at least a benign attitude with respect to Wittgenstein's thought, in order to discuss to what extent that philosophy can still be considered to be alive. This volume can be regarded as a natural development of that conference. We don't know whether the above questions have found a definite answer. Yet we hope that at least the way to find an answer has been traced. In what follows, we have organized the chapters that constitute this volume in three different sections, which in our opinion represent the main subjects on which Wittgenstein's reflections have contributed to philosophical enlightenment: mind, meaning, and metaphilosophy. Let us briefly summarize the chapters' content, according to the different sections in which they are located.

The section on mind opens with a chapter that addresses one of Wittgenstein's convictions that are nowadays hardest to swallow, namely his idea that mental states are intimately linked to behavior. William Child shows that for Wittgenstein we undoubtedly apply a mental notion even in cases in which there are no behavioral manifestations of the corresponding mental state, although it is also clear that for him such an application depends on applications in which the corresponding mental states are openly manifested. Child wonders which of three models best accounts for such a dependence: a nonverificationist model



according to which the 'unusual' application of the mental notion in question is as legitimate as the 'usual' one, an antirealist model, according to which the former application stretches the notion's boundary, and a verificationist model, according to which the application is based on finding a physical trace – typically, a brainy trace. Child concludes that Wittgenstein may be seen as essentially wavering between the first two models.

Joachim Schulte addresses the famous sections of the *Investigations* devoted to the clarification of what reading is. By stressing how those sections constitute a unitary block substantially derived from a previous reflection in the *Brown Book*, Schulte shows that Wittgenstein wants to focus on human reading as a mental activity which stands in between a mechanical way of reading that machines actually perform and a para-mechanical (mis)conception of reading which interprets reading as essentially consisting in a psychic experience vivifying dead symbols. One might gloss that human reading, as an operation of deriving sounds from written symbols in conformity with some rule of derivation, is a paradigmatic case of obeying a rule blindly. Yet, Schulte notes how for Wittgenstein reading also involves some Gestalt-like operation by which the written symbols are seen as having a certain unity and familiarity. According to Schulte, although Wittgenstein was tempted to regard that operation as consisting in having a *sui generis* experience of some kind, he resisted the temptation: having a determinate (*bestimmt*) experience while reading does not amount to having an experience belonging to a certain sort.

As known, the so-called 'standard view' of action, according to which, roughly, actions are to be conceived of as bodily movements caused and rationalized by the agent's beliefs and desires, understood as inner states or events in her mind/brain, gradually replaced the Wittgensteinian orthodoxy based on the principle that reasons cannot be causes of actions. One of the aims Frederick Stoutland pursues in his chapter is that of throwing light on the true role that Davidson's work played in that epochal transition. As Stoutland notes, Davidson himself stressed how fundamental, in the conflict between his conception and the Wittgensteinian viewpoint, the issue was of whether rational explanations of human behavior are causal explanations. As a result of his deep investigations, Stoutland makes a distinction between two interpretations of Davidson's account of the rational explanation of action: one that is usually taken as a source of the standard view, and another – the right one in Stoutland's opinion – on which the distance between Davidson's conception and the best Wittgensteinian

accounts is definitely smaller than it is usually taken to be. One of the most important points of convergence which clearly emerges from Stoutland's analysis is that, contrary to physicalists and dualists, both Davidson and the Wittgensteinians construe beliefs and desires not as states either of the brain or of the mind, but as states of whole persons.

Alberto Voltolini ends the 'mind'-Section by stressing two points. First, the 'later' Wittgenstein's appeal to the private language argument against a pre-linguistic conception of thought is vitiated by an ungrounded assumption. *Second*, the famous criticism the 'later' Wittgenstein apparently addressed against a younger self about a conception of mental states as endowed with both original and intrinsic intentionality is also similarly vitiated. In the former case, the assumption is the normativity of language. In the latter case, the assumption is the factual nature of mental states prompted by their representational character. Once those assumptions, especially the latter one, are dropped, there is room not only for a pre-linguistic conception of thoughts, but also for thoughts endowed with both original and intrinsic intentionality. Such a theoretical space, Voltolini concludes, is not utterly anti-Wittgensteinian. For the mature conception one can draw from Wittgenstein concerning the relationship between (public) language and thought is that complex thoughts, but not simple thoughts, need (public) language to be articulated.

According to a familiar picture, Wittgenstein insisted on both the rule governed nature of language and the idea that linguistic rules are conventions, that is, rules that are both arbitrary and intersubjectively shared. Against both Chomskyan and (more profusely) Davidsonian semantic individualism, Hanjo Glock intends to vindicate the Wittgensteinian picture: meaningful language requires the existence of conventions. Particularly, language requires *lexical* conventions, that is, 'norms which fix the meaning of particular expressions'. Without such norms there would be no correctness conditions for the use of words, hence no meanings. Glock first defines a 'weak' notion of convention that is intended to overcome the objection that for conventions to be possible, language must already be in place (for conventions are said to require that the participants have beliefs and attitudes towards the beliefs and attitudes of others, and such attitudes, in turn, require language). He then goes on to examine (and reject) the individualists' arguments. His general attitude towards the individualistic picture can perhaps be summarized by his concluding remarks: the individualistic picture 'puts communication at the mercy of coincidence. It also puts it at the perhaps even more tender mercy of human intelligence. It

overintellectualizes linguistic communication by demanding speakers to engage constantly in highly complex interpretations. The communitarian picture is far more realistic.'

As is well known, Paul Horwich supports a use theory of meaning. In his article, he reformulates the theory and defends it against criticism implicit in Kripke's 'Wittgensteinian' scepticism and general views about meaning, rules, and rule following. In the Appendix, Horwich attempts to show that his views are consonant with Wittgenstein's; indeed, more so than some of the views that Kripke attributes him. In some cases, he relies on the standard picture of Wittgenstein's thought: thus he states his agreement with Wittgenstein on deflationism about truth (quoting PI §136 in support), on the idea that meaning is use, on the variety of word use, and on rules being sometimes followed implicitly, that is, not on the basis of explicit formulations. In other cases, he argues against widespread exegetical opinion: he holds that for Wittgenstein rule following is 'individualistic', though of course not private, and that a practice (of following a rule) 'can perfectly well be constituted in the regular activity of a single isolated person'; that meaning isn't constitutively normative and that Wittgenstein never suggests otherwise; and, finally, that Wittgenstein's ban on philosophical theorizing does not apply to his own (Horwich's) theory of meaning, as the latter 'is nothing more than an assemblage of potentially obvious points.' Of course – he adds – even the obvious may be missed 'by someone who is looking in the wrong direction'.

According to Diego Marconi, an important reason of the current disfavor for Wittgenstein's philosophy lies in its hostility to metaphysics, which Wittgenstein accused of 'obliterat[ing] the distinction between factual and conceptual investigations' (Z §458). Wittgenstein was particularly hostile to the idea of necessary facts, that is, to the claim that there are necessary propositions which, if true, can be known to be true only a posteriori. Such a claim was first put forth by Saul Kripke and is nowadays endorsed by many philosophers. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* argued against the viability of the notion of a necessary fact: the argument, however, heavily depends on assumptions that are integral to the *Tractatus's* picture theory. Nevertheless, there is a simpler version of Wittgenstein's argument that is not so committed. The latter argument has been widely discussed in recent years; Marconi shows that its failure is not uncontroversial. Thus, the anti-Wittgensteinian case for necessary facts is not as strong as it is usually taken to be.

Eva Picardi's chapter has two parts. In the first part, she argues that Frege's and Wittgenstein's endorsement of the context principle does

not entail that they are committed to anything resembling today's 'radical contextualism,' as defended by Charles Travis, François Recanati, and other philosophers; moreover, the later Wittgenstein's insistence on the variety of uses of what is materially one linguistic expression should be distinguished (*pace* Travis) from the contextualists' claim that any sentence can express different propositions in different circumstances. In the second part, Picardi shows that the later Wittgenstein's views on the semantic function of proper names were generally much closer to Frege's views than some have taken them to be, in spite of Wittgenstein's anti-Fregean claim that there can be no uniform account of the semantic role of proper names. Picardi's discussion is intended to rescue Frege's and Wittgenstein's account of the semantic function of proper names from oblivion inspired by the prevalence of direct reference theories: 'Frege's and Wittgenstein's description of the way we use proper names – she remarks – is not rendered obsolete by the picture sketched by causal theories of reference.'

Timothy Williamson ends the 'meaning'-Section by giving it a slightly different twist. His polemical focus is the idea of epistemological analyticity, that is, the thesis according to which necessarily, whoever understands a sentence which is an alleged candidate for being an analytical truth (e.g., 'Every vixen is a female fox') assents to it. Not only Williamson doubts that the thesis entails other theses such as that whoever understands a sentence which is an alleged candidate for being an analytical truth knows the content expressed by that sentence, or that whoever understands a sentence which is an alleged candidate for being an analytical truth is justified in assenting to it, but also puts the original thesis into question. In his opinion, understanding one such sentence has nothing to do with recognizing that sentence as true, however this recognition is conceived. In Williamson's lights, this questioning undermines various inferentialist accounts of meaning that have been defended by many *lato sensu* Wittgensteinian philosophers (e.g., Robert Brandom and Michael Dummett), insofar as those accounts conceive the acceptance of some inference rules as constituting the understanding of the logical constants, hence of the sentences in which they occur. Although Wittgenstein did not explicitly defend an epistemological conception of analyticity, his claim that grammatical sentences – his *analog on* of analytical truths – sound obvious to people understanding them surely lies in the vicinity of that conception.

In his chapter, Pasquale Frasca sets out a general criterion according to which any tentative interpretation of the ontology of the *Tractatus* can be assessed as correct or incorrect. The criterion is based on the

identification of five theses to be found in Wittgenstein's early masterpiece, concerning the nature of objects and states of affairs, which any sound interpretation is required to consistently account for. Most of the work is devoted to commenting upon some crucial sections of the *Tractatus* from which such theses are extracted. In particular, the issue of how the status of substantiality accorded to objects can be made compatible with the possibility that an object does not occur in any of the facts into which the world divides is given a strategic position. As a result of his investigations, Frascolla makes the claim that objects are to be conceived of as abstract universals, whereas states of affairs are to be taken as concrete particulars which instantiate the former. This conclusion is attained quite independently of the answer to be given to the further question as to the phenomenalistic or physicalistic framework of the *Tractatus* ontology: it is only the sections devoted to solipsism which settle the matter in favor of the first interpretative option.

Wittgensteinian scholars notoriously do not agree on the weight to be attributed to Wittgenstein's explicitly metaphilosophical remarks. In her chapter, Meredith Williams makes a distinction between two parties: the party of those who maintain that, in spite of his own pronouncements, the later Wittgenstein did in fact develop theories of language and mind which in many respects are alternative to traditional philosophical theories but which, so to speak, are placed in the same space of the latter; and the party of those who take Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical remarks at face value and construe his statements as expressions of a radical rejection of the entire traditional philosophical attitude and project. Williams would like to show how to avoid the Scylla of the constructivist interpretations and the Charybdis of the quietist interpretations: in her opinion, the two rival views are undermined by the same misconception of the nature of philosophy, based on an ungrounded assimilation of philosophical theorizing with scientific theorizing. Williams illustrates her point by examining an interpretative question, that of the coherence of Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical statements with the method he actually employs in framing his arguments, and a textual question, that of the reasons for the position which the metaphilosophical remarks have in the *Philosophical Investigations*. As for the first issue, Williams's conclusion is that there is a conflict between Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical remarks and his method of arguing: the latter is not purely descriptive but is governed by a complex methodology characterized by the employment of two main forms of argument (conflation argument form and paradox argument form). As for the second issue, the answer is that the

metaphilosophical remarks occur where they do because that is the point in the *Philosophical Investigations* where the conflation arguments against grammatical mistakes make room for the paradox arguments against philosophical theories.

The volume is concluded by Anthony's Kenny chapter, which is at one and the same time an assessment of Wittgenstein's philosophy in relation to the volume's themes and a commentary of most of the volume's contributions. As far as mind is concerned, Kenny masterfully argues that Wittgenstein endorsed an Aristotelian metaphysics according to which mental states are to be understood in the light of abilities and the exercise of them. By giving Wittgenstein an intermediate position between Cartesianism and behaviorism, this interpretation accounts for both the criteriality of the relation between mind and behavior and the inadequacy of a verificationist approach to sentences about mental states. Yet it also shows that Wittgenstein's claim that the task of philosophy is merely descriptive and not theoretical was not quite honored by Wittgenstein himself, even though he did practice a reminder of the obvious, by prompting us to see differences also by way of comparison. In this respect, Wittgenstein's conception of meaning is enlightening. In his normative approach Wittgenstein distances himself from a crypto-nomological account of normativity as the one Horwich appears to defend. Moreover, he only allows for non-social rule-following as derivative on a social one. By way of a comment, this shows that, if one guessed that Wittgenstein's stance on rule-following is rooted in the ordinary use the expression 'to follow a rule', this conjecture would only be prompted by too literal a reading of the famous sections of the *Investigations* on the descriptive practice in which good philosophy consists.



**Part I**

**Mind**



