Vienna's Wittgenstein

This book is a reprint of the first edition of 1973. There are some minor revisions, and the section of photographs from the first edition has been omitted from this edition. I must commend the publisher for ensuring that this work remain in print. *Wittgenstein's Vienna* is a brilliantly conceived mix of rich cultural history and philosophic argument. I will try to highlight what I consider the most important arguments of this book, but first I will introduce Wittgenstein in order to show why the book's initial publication was a matter of some historical significance.

In 1911, the twenty-two year-old Viennese engineer Ludwig Wittgenstein had travelled to Cambridge to study with Bertrand Russell. Along with Frege and Whitehead, Russell had developed a language of primitive letter symbols and logical syntax to represent facts in the real world with much greater clarity than ordinary languages such as English or German. Like mathematics, which it resembled, this new language was free of value-laden meanings, connotations, and other cultural baggage that hindered the struggle for clarity of conception. Wittgenstein, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, published in 1921, took up the question about how language represents reality. By means of a logical progression of propositions, Wittgenstein discussed how language can explain facts and the limits to which language may be applied. He argued that we are able to use language to represent the real world because we immediately convert propositions such as "Ludwig is Viennese," or "acid turns litmus paper red" into mental pictures. But he also argued that Russell's proposition, that the terms of the simplest ("atomic") propositions correspond to things in the

real world, cannot be supported. Russell's notion of correspondence between language and reality is *about* reality. We cannot use language to prove that language actually describes reality. All we can do is *show* that it describes reality when we apply theoretical models to problems and then obtain useful results.

In short, Wittgenstein had no sooner demonstrated how Russell's method would work than he denied the validity of its fundamental contention. In fact, Wittgenstein wrote, if one follows the logical development of his own *Tractatus* to the end, one will be led to conclude that its attempt to state something about language and reality makes *it* nonsensical!

By the late 1920s, Wittgenstein had become the hero of the Vienna Circle, logical positivists who would purge metaphysics or anything non-observable from science. Wittgenstein died in 1951, and over the next decades the strict empiricists who reigned within social science departments invoked his name (along with Max Weber's) to legitimate their contention that only the observable and especially the measurable were meaningful, and that everything else, including ethical questioning, was meaningless. The goal of those scientists was to gather statistical or other forms of "hard" data gleaned from cultures around the world, and to verify or falsify hypotheses and to canonize those hypotheses that passed these tests as timeless and universal laws of social-psychological, political, or economic behavior. Those of us who were trained in the 1950s and 1960s were taught that "hard" social, behavioral, or cliometric scientists had to eschew "feelings"

unless they took the form of analyzable data gleaned from opinion polls and the like. Anyone who raised questions about inner feelings or the meaning or value of human life was patronized as a "poet" and dismissed from serious circles altogether. This, while the threat of nuclear war and, later, the war in Vietnam was raging! I should add that academics who adorned themselves with this mantle of "hard scientist" and who legitimated themselves by invoking Wittgenstein's name, became increasingly puffed up as they shuttled between academia, the foundations, AID, CIA, and the Pentagon, convinced that social science had a major role to play in the coming Pax Americana. But consider those hard science-minded professors and students who opposed the war–and they were legion–who could not say "It's wrong" because scientifically proper discourse precluded non-factual propositions. Even the most voluble were stunned into a kind of paralytic aphasia, unable to express in words what burned so intensely within, even suffering feelings of guilt: first, for not being able to speak up about matters of such profound importance; and second, for harboring such "ideological" positions within scientific confines. They *felt* their rage and shame, *showed* it in their facial expressions or gestures, but, to the degree that they remained inside the discourse, were forced into silence. That silence was finally broken with petition-signings, teach-ins, demonstrations and marches, and a reassessment of intellectual and scientific values.

Enter Janik and Toulmin in 1973. *Wittgenstein's Vienna* was part of that revaluation, for it pulled the rug from under those who had assumed that Wittgenstein had no use for ethical questions. Not only had Wittgenstein placed great value upon such questions, but his struggle to find a form by which to express these questions was a preoccupation he shared with his Viennese intellectual and artistic contemporaries. Janik and Toulmin were thus arguing that, once we see Wittgenstein within his Viennese cultural milieu rather than as a pure logician transplanted to Cambridge, then we gain a much different, fuller, and truer picture of his aims and goals. It will turn out that when Wittgenstein embarked from Vienna to travel to Cambridge, he had more than purely linguistic-empirical questions in mind. He would study with Russell because he hoped to determine not only the limits within which language represented reality, but something about the nature of the other side of that limit; that is, about how ethical concerns, value convictions, and inner states are to be expressed. If he concluded that we must be silent about such matters, it was not because he dismissed them, but, to the contrary, because he valued them so very much, and wanted to ensure the purity of their own sphere.

To make their case that Wittgenstein had profoundly unsettled ethical questions, Janik and Toulmin make important forays into Viennese intellectual history and cultural politics for the period within which Wittgenstein's sensibilities were formed, and up to the moment that he embarked for Cambridge. And what forays they are! That world of coffeehouse writers such as Karl Kraus, Peter Altenberg, and Hermann Bahr; of Hermann Broch, Hugo von Hofmansthal, of Robert Musil and Arthur Schnitzler; of Freud; of the painters Gustav Klimt, Oscar Kokoschka, and Egon Schiele; of the composers Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg: all these and many more are served up by Janik and Toulmin. So too, Vienna's not-so-underground erotic life and erotic preoccupations, its housing problems, its Jewish culture and its anti-semitism: all these are melded into a vivid picture of the Vienna of Wittgenstein's era. If we keep in mind the fact that most of the works that constitute the bibliography of the Vienna revival, including Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna*[1] and Kirk Varnedoe's *Vienna 1900*,[2] were published after 1973, we can understand the importance of Janik and Toulmin's efforts. But beyond their explorations of cultural life are those of logic and philosophy of science. If Janik is the cultural historian and Toulmin the philosopher, both have worked together to ensure that their non-specialist readers are carefully guided through the various materials. Rarely does a work combine so much, and remain so readable, at the same time.

Now to the book's major themes. The authors argue that Wittgenstein's Viennese contemporaries were fundamentally critical of the official culture. The Viennese cultural elite was a wide-ranging group sick to death of the inauthenticity of what Robert Musil would come to characterize as "kakania"–the multi-national and multi-linguistic empire held together by pomp and glitter manufactured by a tired and decrepit monarchical House of Habsburg and imperial bureaucracy that denied that anything was amiss until a crisis occurred. And then there was the "kaka" itself: a corrupted literature, an overly ornamented art and architecture, an over-romanticized music. To take these in order: writers in search of new forms, such as Hermann Bahr and Hugo von Hofmansthal, found inspiration from physicist Ernst Mach, who argued that too much of contemporary physics was laden with layers of metaphysical and theological meanings inherited from past eras, and called for a physics based strictly upon observation. The critic Karl Kraus, waging unending war against corruptions of language,

attacked the popular *feuilleton*, the newspaper column that made a melange of truth and fiction and thereby deprecated the validity of each form. The architect and designer Adolf Loos demanded that objects be designed for maximum use-value and function, rather than for ornamentation, with function in second place. The composer Arnold Schoenberg struggled to find a pure musical language not bound to the diatonic system that had reached its culmination in an overripe post-Wagnerian hyper-romanticism. On each front, the dissidents and secessionists struggled to find new, valid modes of expression to replace the artificial and inauthentic.

But it was Kraus's outlook that set the tone for most of the dissidents, including Wittgenstein. Kraus found valid forms of expression in the employment of commentless quotation, sarcasm, and irony, to expose, that is, to *show*, hypocrisy, corruption, cheap commercialization, or other forms of shoddy behavior. A participant in the Kierkegaard revival, Kraus took from the Danish philosopher the root idea that the ethical life emerges when the individual, in the deepest recesses of mind, forms an action that rests upon faith that one is making life's decisions as if God were present, even though God is silent. There are no dictates from authority to guide the individual. One is alone, in one's thoughts and feelings, beyond language. Ethics, then, is not formulaic, not reducible to rules of behavior. To Kraus, the lesson was clear: the point was not to *state* the ethical—it could not be stated—but to *show* by pointing to its opposite.

Along with Kierkegaard, the Viennese intelligentsia, Wittgenstein included, was apparently deeply impressed by Tolstoy's ethical writings. Like Kierkegaard, Tolstoy placed importance upon inner feeling rather than ethical ratiocination, and employed parable in order to convey the value of compassion. The parable *shows* the ethical, but does not *state* it.

I turn to Janik and Toulmin's discussion of those Viennese epistemological concerns that likewise preoccupied Wittgenstein.

Where Kant had understood the limits of reason within the problematic of the categories of understanding, Arthur Schopenhauer argued that these categories were really of language. Fritz Mauthner (d. 1923) now followed Schopenhauer to inquire into the limits of language for understanding reality. Language is a social convention, Mauthner argued, a tool for human survival. But inasmuch as words are full of idiosyncratic connotation, they cannot with certainty point directly toward, or correspond to, anything in the external world. Therefore

there is no way to move from language directly to inner or external reality, much as we try. Rather than try to represent reality, it is best to remain silent.

While much of this was no doubt appealing to Wittgenstein, the engineer within him could not be satisfied with Mauthner's conclusion that denied the validity of the exact sciences. Wittgenstein now found support for a much different view in the work of the German physicist Heinrich Hertz who, in 1893, had published his *Principles of Mechanics*. As Janik and Toulmin carefully explain, whereas Mach would limit science to sense-data, thus approaching the physical world from the outside, Hertz would begin with a mathematical and graphical representation of the mechanical system, thus building a science from the inside. Hertz's mechanical theory begins, in other words, not with sense-data, but with an intuition, a mathematical-logical system based upon primitive terms–for example, a particle in a space-time grid– to account for, and predict, the displacement of a particle of mass from one place to another under various conditions. What Hertz, and the Austrian Ludwig Boltzmann (d. 1906) had done in physics, building a formal language to represent graphically static and dynamic physical states, bore a family resemblance to what others in Vienna were doing in various humanistic fields: finding a language appropriate for the expression of truth and authenticity. For Wittgenstein, Hertz's *Principles* were profound indeed. He had before him a model that could be adapted to discerning the extent to which language could represent reality, a limit beyond which questions of ethics would find their sphere. But Hertz provided only a portion of what Wittgenstein needed. Wittgenstein needed as well a method by which to explore the very forms and limits of language, representation, and ethics. It was with all this in mind that he embarked for Cambridge, there to combine Hertz's model of physical reality, Russell's theories of language and propositional logic, and, as the authors write, the "ethics of Kierkegaard and Tolstoy," all to be formed into "a single consistent exposition" (p. 168).

Somehow, the ethical side of Wittgenstein's preoccupations did not get into philosophic discourse in the years after the publication of the *Tractatus*. The fault was apparently his own. In his "Preface" to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein remarked that "The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence." He then writes that "The aim of the book is to set a limit to … the expression of thoughts," and that, because one can-

not think about what is beyond the limit thought, or language, "what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense."[3] He did not explain that it is ethical struggle which is "on the other side." But he did so elsewhere, and it is at this point that Janik and Toulmin deliver their trump card by quoting Wittgenstein's letter to the editor, Ludwig Ficker. " 'The *Tractatus*,' " he writes, "'consists of two parts: the one presented here [in the text of the *Tractatus*] plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part which is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY rigorous way of drawing those limits'" (p. 192).

In the absence of this letter, or other hints that Wittgenstein was preoccupied with ethical concerns, he could certainly be taken for a logical positivist. That is indeed how Moritz Schlick and other members of the Vienna Circle read the *Tractatus*, that is, to legitimize the exclusion of non-scientific propositions pure and simple. They could not understand Wittgenstein's reluctance to meet with them, because they could not understand that Wittgenstein was so terribly interested in what to do with the values/ethics/metaphysical side of the divide. Small wonder they were baffled when, instead of discussing matters on their agenda, he read poetry to them in his attempt to enlist them in his agenda (p. 215).

The one area of agreement between Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle was over the question of verification. The Circle members assumed that a proposition was meaningful to the extent that it was verifiable (or falsifiable) by means of some form of observation. Wittgenstein had not posited verification as a test of a proposition's meaningfulness in the *Tractatus*, but for a while seemed to accept this doctrine. The Vienna Circle positivists remained tied to the idea–they were very much interested in social reconstruction and planning in the aftermath of the breakup of the Habsburg Empire, and saw their role as providing the basis for a unified science. Wittgenstein's mind, however, was moving elsewhere. By the early 1930s he had turned from thinking about the correspondences between language and reality, to the anthropologically oriented language-game theory that would ultimately appear in his *Philosophic Investigations*, published in 1953, two years after his death.[4]

The authors do not end their book at this point, but I will stop here. Wittgenstein would become a British resident from World War II until his death in 1951. Vienna would no longer be his. Of the authors' discussion about the ossification of the musical and scientific move-

ments in later decades, and the resurfacing of Habsburg-like problems in contemporary (1973) American politics, I will remain silent. I do wish to raise three issues, however.

First, Janik and Toulmin (pp. 243-46) wonder why Wittgenstein did not elaborate his new anthropological outlook into a historical one, to ask about the conditions within which language games have been formed. Others, including the members of the Vienna Circle, were certainly concerned with political and social developments, but apparently Wittgenstein was not. The authors imply (p. 242) that a "psychobiography" of Wittgenstein might very well discuss his tendencies toward "solipsism" (p. 244) and his "extreme Kierkegaardian individualism" akin to a form of "alienation" (p. 245). The authors were right to halt their speculation upon this point, given the fact that theirs is chiefly an intellectual-historical, not a biographical, work.[5]

Second, the authors suggest (pp. 15 and 107-8), that Schoenberg had adopted the 12-tone system in 1911. The suggestion is misleading: Schoenberg moved into atonality in 1908, and developed the 12-tone system in 1920 and 1921.[6]

Third, Janik and Toulmin never mention the profound importance of Nietzsche upon the young Viennese, not least Wittgenstein himself. Roy Monk notes that Wittgenstein found much to approve from his reading of Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ*, especially on the deprecation of theology and belief, and the raising to importance of Christ's actions as showing by example how to live with suffering.[7]

I must end on a positive note. *Wittgenstein's Vienna* is a remarkable work. Its republication ensures that this now classic text remains accessible to the general and specialist readerships.

Notes

[1]. Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

[2]. Kirk Varnedoe, *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture and Design* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986). William Johnston's *The Austrian Mind: An Intellectual and Social History, 1848-1938* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972) was published the year before *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, but it did not study Vienna as a cultural center.

[3]. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-*

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Philosophicus [1921], trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 3.

[4]. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Macmillan, 1953). Wittgenstein's initial lectures on language games were delivered as lectures at Cambridge between 1933 and 1935, and are published as *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper, 1965).

[5]. For Wittgenstein's apolitical and solipsistic outlook see: Wittgenstein's *Notebooks: 1914-1916.* 2d ed., ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe; trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein, A Life: Young Ludwig, 1889-1921* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Roy Monk's magisterial *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin, 1990);

Louis A. Sass, *The Paradoxes of Delusion: Wittgenstein, Schreber, and the Schizophrenic Mind* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[6]. See Oliver Neighbour, "Arnold Schoenberg" in *The New Grove: The Second Viennese School, Schoenberg, Webern, Berg* (New York: Norton, 1983) 48; Charles Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), xiv.

[7]. Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, 123.

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