

## WITTGENSTEIN, THE ANTIPHILOSOPHER, AND MATHEMATICS

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French intellectuals during the Enlightenment were commonly referred to as 'philosophers'; a minority among them in reaction styled themselves 'anti-philosophers' [1]. The word and the idea, then and still now, are easily recognizable, and were sporadically used ever since. In Paris intellectual circles of the 1970s, Jacques Lacan resorted occasionally to the word and it began to be used there again; today it stands conspicuously in the title of a book by Alain Badiou: *Wittgenstein's Anti-Philosophy* [2]. The disapproval that is intuitively assumed behind the word is deployed in a study, its topic being obviously the overexposed (anti)philosopher.

Wittgenstein never appreciated mathematics, but apparently he did not understand it either. Alain Badiou, on the contrary, situates his philosophizing, declaratively and consistently, in a continuation of mathematics. So, it does not take much to guess that Wittgenstein will not be among the philosophers he sympathizes with - one of the few constants in the texts of 'early' and 'late ' Wittgenstein is the undisguised dislike of mathematics. According to *the Tractatus*, mathematics says nothing; in *Philosophical Studies* it is reduced to an anthropological caricature in the form of a 'rule'. About the *Notes on the Foundations of Mathematics* [3], Badiou sarcastically notes that it is the most non-existent of Wittgenstein's books /171/ and refuses to consider it. Indeed, it has never been a secret that it is a purely editorial artifact, which caused consternation at the time of its appearance, soon to be followed by devastating criticism [4]. Actually Badiou's book also does not exist very convincingly, insofar as it simply brings together two of his earlier studies, leaving a planned third part unwritten. It seems to be just a modest contribution to the academic industry exploiting the "Wittgenstein" brand and which has already produced, as he says, 'a galactic' volume of texts about which nothing much has to be said - except "They are all excellent " /158-9/.

An attitude like Badiou's is rare among contemporary philosophers, and it could hardly serve as the basis of any convincing critique. By defining Wittgenstein precisely as an anti-philosopher, Badiou places him in a series of easily recognizable names: Pascal, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Lacan. Sketching the contours of a latent tradition for the purpose of his particular case, in fact succeeds in giving the analysis some additional interest. Wittgenstein's own

place in this series - between Nietzsche and Lacan - is further commented on throughout the text.

Hardly anyone would dispute the originality of those listed, but just as indisputably, they appear to stand against an implied background, or perhaps as reactions to their predecessors and opponents. It is generally agreed that Pascal reacted to Descartes, Rousseau to the Encyclopedists, Kierkegaard to Hegel, Nietzsche to Plato(ism), Lacan to Althusser. The beginning could have been Heraclitus vs. Parmenides and, for a finale in the near future, Bosteels suggests, Žižek vs. Badiou. The late Wittgenstein is more or less at war with the views of his early ego, which he interprets, criticizes and modifies, leaving behind what Badiou calls 'his personal Talmud'/76/. However, the invisible opponent of the early Wittgenstein remains rather unclear: one would assume that it was academic scientism, and so one notices the irony that the *neo-positivists* could have taken Wittgenstein as their inspiration.

Badiou marks three areas in which anti-philosophy tends to manifest itself more clearly: semantics, pragmatics and ethics. His analysis shows that anti-philosophers begin with a critical re-reading of their chosen antecedents, which further serves them for staging their 'exposure' - a rejection of their truth positions as selfishly motivated. Finally, anti-philosophers offer their own alternative for the 'right' way of life, including the total devaluation of philosophy. The similarity between Nietzsche and Wittgenstein is notable enough on the first two points, while their final disagreement, which also leads beyond philosophy, is, in this perspective, mostly inessential. While Nietzsche refers above all to 'values', Wittgenstein persistently imposes 'meaning', a typical supplément which complements meaning and completely devalues it. Within a page (after some preparation) Wittgenstein, for example, manages to push through his view that philosophy is not thinking:

(4.0) A thought is a meaningful proposition and (4.01) A proposition is a model of reality, of how we think it.

(4.003) Most propositions and questions which are written on philosophical subjects, are not false, but senseless (unsinnig, nonsensical).

In the same breath comes the suggestion that 'meaning' is something more valuable than truth. The rhetorical strategy is rather obvious: Wittgenstein offers a peculiar understanding of the traditional problem about 'what is philosophy', then readily declares that it is not what we need: agreeing with his presentation seems to entail further rejection. A critical attitude, however, could exploit his construction by taking it as a *reductio ad absurdum*: *if* philosophy were what Wittgenstein claims, *then* all that he tries to suggest would follow - that no

thinking person should be concerned with it. Such a move however is more or less (implicitly) acceptable for the proponents of analytic philosophy. But one should note that the same rhetorical strategy is applied to mathematics and the scheme would work analogously:

(6.2) Mathematical propositions are equations and are therefore pseudo-propositions.

(6.21) A mathematical proposition does not express any thought.

(6.211) In life we never come across the mathematical proposition we (do) need, but we use a given mathematical proposition only to deduce from propositions that do not belong to mathematics...

Badiou did not delve further into the disjointed reflections on mathematics recorded by the late Wittgenstein, but the general idea expounded in his seminars 1993/4 on anti-philosophy was apparently applied to them first. At the same time Penelope Meddy published her article on *Wittgenstein's anti-philosophy of mathematics* [5]. Her approach is not so openly offensive, but it fits well with the perspective drawn by Badiou. She begins with a collage of two close paragraphs from *Philosophical Investigations* (§126 and 109): "philosophy simply puts things before us, and does not explain or deduce anything" - "we must not construct any theory...all explanation must be removed and only description left in its place," which she uses to explain that "This becomes anti-philosophy in the sense that modern novels have anti-heroes - the anti-hero is the protagonist in the narrative, just as the hero was, but he lacked the usually expected qualities (nobility, strength, fearlessness). Anti-philosophy, although it is done by professional philosophers, does not attempt to deal with explanations or with true theories". Reading further (in Badiou's lens) the samples she selects, it appears unequivocally that a devalued and de-heroized philosophy, devoid of any glamor and authority, is supposed to stand aside. Specifically for mathematics, Wittgenstein's reconstructed opinion is that the prestige of some philosophy had diverted mathematicians from their natural occupation - calculations; however, the removal of the harmful philosophy would return the discipline to its own original work. Without being a mathematician and having renounced the usual philosophy, Wittgenstein still knows what exactly mathematicians are presumed to do; the removal of philosophy prescribed by him would not count as a philosophical intervention, insofar as his attitude is that he "leaves things as they are". He recommends not only the end of the search for the foundations of mathematics, but of all pure mathematics. Knowing about his engineering background, one can guess what he would assign to it.

The valorization of some kind of (non)thinking that is neither philosophy nor mathematics predictably leads into religion or aesthetics, if not into some mystical mixture of the two. The anti - intellectual attitude is undoubtedly something that anti-philosophers share. During Nietzsche's lifetime and Wittgenstein's youth, a vague *Lebensphilosophie* sketched the general outlines of an approach that Nietzsche and Wittgenstein would promote. It was not so long ago that the names which Badiou mentions appeared in various lists of 'precursors of existentialism' [6]. A rapprochement of Wittgenstein to them would not be an overwhelming task, especially when additionally details from biographies are also taken in account. Pascal, for instance, started as a child prodigy in mathematics, exhausted himself with the construction of a calculating machine and went on to compose a book, for which he wrote down his "Pensees", conducted polemics and fell into mysticism; it's easy to draw an analogy with what happened with Wittgenstein: he designed airplane engines, wrote *the Tractatus* with its anti-philosophical conclusions, and then wrote all sorts of notes that never yielded a coherent text (and this happened in Cambridge instead of Port Royal). Badiou just notes, after valorizing atheoretical behaviors, anti-philosophers have no other consequent move than to throw in their personal being. (His familiarity with psychoanalytic views probably incited him to make a few remarks about women in the biographies of his chosen antiphilosophers /p.95-6/). Freudianism exposes unconscious motivations, as Nietzsche exposes the hidden desire for power behind the things supposed to be just cultural. Wittgenstein thought he had discovered the harm that philosophy unreflexively was doing to people and mathematics. All three options are suggesting that society is made safe from allegedly usurpating interventions. Lacan knows all these attempts, but considers them doomed – he would be the total anti-philosopher, not only insofar as he comes last in the series, but also in his refusal to engage directly with any (anti)philosophy. Badiou not only acknowledges that he owes him the idea of a specific form for anti-philosophy: it was about his views that he first wrote so, and also then discovered the key element. The original eloquent title *Lacan et Platon: Le matheme est-il une idee ?* was quickly recast in the programmatic *Antiphilosophy: Plato and Lacan* [7]. The attitude towards mathematics, Plato, or, more generally, "Authority" is decisive for determining the positions. Anti-philosophers turn out to be anti-mathematical, and at the same time, with the exception of Nietzsche, of course, they accept the approved religion. Lacan's objections to Plato can hardly be considered straightforward, but he undoubtedly accepts some form of authority as inevitable. Nietzsche's lapidary formulation " Christianity is Platonism for the masses" [8] is remembered and it suggests a simple way to situate him: if Nietzsche rejects all

Platonism, Badiou accepts only the so-called 'mathematical' Platonism, and Wittgenstein advocates an ersatz - Platonism hidden in the mysticism of meaning. Deleuze and the entire French Neo-Nietzscheanism have adopted the slogan of 'overcoming Platonism', but Badiou differs from them in that he accepts Platonic mathematical insight as authentic while he rejects its later extensions by analogy - precisely those that the Christian tradition specifically cultivates. After the scientific revolution of the 17th century, Newton, the Enlightenment and mathematized science, comes the Kantian critique, which declares that "it will limit knowledge to make room for faith". Thus, after the 19th century, Frege and Russell, comes Wittgenstein, demonstrating how little a simple rationality would be offering.

A more sympathetic reading might try to see Wittgenstein's endeavor in *the Tractatus* as an attempt to separate the public sphere from the private one and, accordingly, his conclusion that what is admissible for discussion is uninteresting. But as Badiou points out, it is the anti-philosophers who maximally erase the private/public boundary, and examples from Wittgenstein's biography undoubtedly support his thesis. After *the Tractatus*, within ten years he no longer dealt with philosophy - but instead became a teacher; he returned to it only to use it for obtaining a teaching post at Cambridge. And without publishing more, he continues to insist on the validity of his early insight, albeit in a different form. This toned down, later version gained popularity as a "therapeutic" view of philosophy, while Badiou, remaining with the earlier one, revealed more categorically what he defined as 'anti-philosophy'.

## Notes

[1] Bosteels B, *Radical Antiphilosophy*, Filozofski Vestnik, 29.2 (2008), 155-87, [PDF](#)

[2] Badiou A, *L'antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein*, Caen: Nous, 2009; published earlier in German in as *Wittgensteins Antiphilosophie* (2007); here *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, transl. B. Bosteels, London: Verso, 2011. Two previous publications have been (slightly) reworked and combined in it: Badiou A, *Silence, solipsisme, sainteté, L' anti-philosophie de Wittgenstein*, Barca! Poésie, Politique, Psychoanalyse 3 (1994) p. 13; and *Les langues de Wittgenstein*, Rue Descartes, 26 (1999) p.107-16. [JSTOR](#)

[3] The publications accumulated on the subject of 'Wittgenstein and (philosophy of) mathematics' are in a number that makes them hard to survey, but it is good to consider that just a few are written by people educated as mathematicians while the significant part of the authors, as analytic philosophers, are rather biased. The first reviews are included in the *Philosophy of mathematics, Selected readings*, ed. Benacerraf R., and Putnam N., New Jersey: Prentice- Hall, 1964, but they

were dropped in subsequent reprints of the book. The *Wittgenstein Symposium* of 1993 was devoted to the subject, and it featured the work of Penelope Maddy, commented on below; for more on the topic see [IEP](#) and [SEP](#).

[4] Maddy P, *Wittgenstein's Anti-Philosophy of Mathematics*, in *Proc. 15th Int. Wittgenstein Symposium* 1993, ed. J. Czermak and K. Puhl, Vienna: Verlag Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1993, p.52-62,. and reprinted in her *Naturalism in Mathematics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.162-72 [\[PDF\]](#).

[5] As a foundation of his philosophy, Badiou adopted the theory of sets, an area in which Maddy also showed a particular interest, while for Wittgenstein it was a 'cancerous overgrowth'. The initial formulation of Cantor's theory prompted Hilbert to hail it as 'paradise'. In lectures recorded by Wittgenstein's students, on this occasion his strategy of redescribing and rejection is found again: "I would say, 'I have not even thought of trying to expel anyone from this paradise.' I would try to do something completely different: to try to show you that this is not paradise - so that you leave it of your own free will". Wittgenstein L., *Lectures on the Foundations of mathematics*, (Chicago UP, 1989) p.103; see also Hilbert D., *On the Infinite* in *Fundamentals of Geometry*, Sofia: Science and Art, 1978, p.262.

[6] Bosteels, who translated the book into English, reworked his article ([1]) for a preface and noted that in examining *Philosophical Investigations* Stanley Cavell listed the same names, although he added a few others /p.60-1/.

[7] Badiou A., *Lacan et Platon: Le matheme est-il une idée ?*, in *Lacan avec les philosophes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), p. 1-36; a revised version appeared the following year as *Antiphilosophie: Plato et Lacan* , *Conditions*, (Paris: Seuil, 1992), pp. 228-47.

[8] Nietzsche F., *Beyond good and evil* (preface), Sofia: Zakhary Stoyanov, 2002.