

Michael Potter

Wittgenstein's Notes on Logic.

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This volume — a better title might be ‘Wittgenstein’s Very Early Philosophy’ — covers ‘the whole of Wittgenstein’s period working with Russell’ (3). The first fifth of the book (*WNL*) focuses on philosophy within Wittgenstein’s reach during his pre-Cambridge years and first year in Cambridge, when he was learning the trade. Next, in the central chapters, themes from Russell and Frege that Wittgenstein broaches in *Notes on Logic* (*NL*) are critically examined. Finally, some four-fifths of the way in, ideas in the *Tractatus* not in *NL*, ideas about elementary propositions, picturing and the like, are isolated and explained.

Though not principally concerned with textual niceties, Potter has a fair amount to say on the origins of *NL*. In an appendix he conjectures that the text was put together over three days in October 1913, starting from notes extending back ‘perhaps as far as the previous February’ (270). He argues that the items published as ‘First MS’, ‘Third MS’ and ‘Fourth MS’ were translated by Russell from a text Wittgenstein dictated in Birmingham on October 7th, while the item referred to as ‘Second MS’ is Russell’s ‘*transcription*’ of a document (266), now lost, that Wittgenstein wrote in Cambridge on the 8th and the so-called ‘Summary’ is a dictation produced in Cambridge, again in Russell’s presence, on the 9th. (A version of *NL* reflecting these conclusions is included in a second appendix, along with textual notes and an analysis of the later, less authentic, ‘Costello version’.)

It is no easy task to track Wittgenstein’s thinking from mid-October 1911, when he turned up in Cambridge as ‘a self-taught philosophical novice’ (4), to late October 1913, when he left for Norway as an important independent philosopher, one responsible for ideas Russell considered ‘as good as anything that has ever been done in logic’ (262-3). Wittgenstein instructed Russell to destroy his early notebooks and there is not much else to go on, just a handful of letters from Wittgenstein to Russell, diaries of contemporaries, meager University records and letters of varying reliability from Russell to Ottoline Morell (and one or two other acquaintances). To compensate Potter scours the philosophical literature likely familiar to Wittgenstein for clues.

By scrutinizing this literature, Potter aims to put us in a position to work through *NL* on our own. He does not provide a line-by-line commentary but refers to Wittgenstein’s text as he proceeds (and appends a list of page references to the quoted passages). He observes that ‘[t]he bulk of the book itself is taken up with exegesis — not, certainly, of every sentence of the *Notes*, but at least of what (he takes) to be their central claims’ and writes: ‘An important aspect of this book [is] to disentangle these texts in order to leave the way to philosophical understanding of Wittgenstein’s intentions much clearer’ (3).

NL is, to put it mildly, a hard read, and Potter does his level best to make it less forbidding. He expounds the ins-and-outs of the work in contempo-

rary philosophical language, paying special attention to conclusions and arguments of interest to philosophers today. Thus he describes Wittgenstein's 'symbolic turn', his understanding of facts and complexes, his treatment of 'the unity of the proposition', his examination of judgment and his conception of meaning and sense, i.e. what makes propositions true or false and what they say about the world. In addition he reviews Wittgenstein's remarks about truth functions, molecular propositions, generality, types, identity and other more specific topics.

It does not hurt that Potter indicates where he thinks his three principals — Wittgenstein, Russell and Frege — go astray. He may be overly bothered by Wittgenstein's 'insouciant attitude to the details of . . . implementing [his thoughts]' (48, 140, 159, 243), unreasonably quick to chide Russell for advancing 'hopeless' theories (36) and unnecessarily harsh about 'Frege's bewildering error of treating sentences as names of truth-values' (254). But his criticisms, however moot, serve to clarify what he takes to be Wittgenstein, Russell and Frege's objectives and what he takes *NL* to be being about.

Potter's observations about Wittgenstein's philosophical approach are no less helpful. It is good to be reminded that Wittgenstein reconfigures philosophical problems or seeks to show they are spurious (43, 61, 73), that 'technicalities were never for [Wittgenstein] the real reasons for holding the views in question' (176) and that 'Wittgenstein's logical insights were independent of formal considerations' (194). Moreover, I appreciated Potter's stressing that 'Wittgenstein's method of theory formation . . . put[s] a much greater premium on suggestive analogies than on reasons' (217) and '[a]lmost all his ideas are, in a certain sense, simple' (2) in fact have 'a forcibly striking combination of depth and simplicity' (250).

Central to Potter's argument in *WNL* is his belief that Wittgenstein was influenced much more by Frege than by Russell. Potter acknowledges that debates about influence are 'often sterile' (258) and concedes that Wittgenstein's friend, David Pinsent, wrote in August 1913: '[I]t is obvious that Wittgenstein is one of Russell's disciples and owes enormously to him' (258). But he insists that 'Wittgenstein owed [the underlying principles which guided his handling of propositions and their relationship to the world] to Frege, not to Russell' (262) and 'the effect that Frege's thinking had on [him] was . . . profound' (58). Indeed he avers that 'Frege's influence on the *Notes* is so persuasive and so manifest that it is almost superfluous to supply an argument for it' (258).

Lacking compelling proof for interpreting Wittgenstein as following in Frege's footsteps, Potter has to speculate. In particular, he portrays Wittgenstein as 'collapsing . . . distinctions Frege had drawn' (70), hazards the opinion that 'Frege's influence can be detected in Wittgenstein's move from copula to form' (109) and deems Wittgenstein's account of the relationship between language and the world to be 'a synthesis of two influences, Frege's and Russell's' (69). At one point he even says: 'Perhaps it is not too fanciful to wonder whether Frege wrote [a certain document in his *Nachlass*] in preparation for, or as a response to, one of his meetings with Wittgenstein' (100).

Wittgenstein thought highly of Frege's writings but was he as indebted to them as Potter contends? Not everyone agrees that Wittgenstein had a firm, never mind deep, understanding of Frege's philosophy, and there can be no denying, as Potter himself allows, that 'Russell's work during [the] period . . . constitutes the context in which Wittgenstein was working' (4). Wittgenstein was a reactive thinker, and it is difficult to believe his three meetings with Frege in 1911-1913, meetings that Potter notes lasted 'a few days at most' (58), marked his philosophy more profoundly than his regular, sometimes daily, meetings with Russell. And how apparent is it that the parallels between Wittgenstein's remarks in *NL* and Frege's pre-1913 writings in his *Posthumous Writings* 'hint at the enormous effect that [Wittgenstein's] few visits to Frege must have had on [him]' (258)?

Separating what Wittgenstein appropriated from what he arrived at independently is especially tricky. It is, to mention one example, possible that his 'conclusion that logic is contentless . . . derives from . . . tenets central to Frege's thinking' (60). But it is equally if not more probable that he came to it very early on. Chances are that Wittgenstein rejected the idea of logic as saying something before reading Frege — and not merely because Frege did not himself, as Potter notes, derive the conclusion. His training in applied physics would have inclined him to think of logic as a technique for making inferences rather than as a body of information, and he was always distrustful of the idea of logical knowledge (149, 205).

Surprisingly, there is little in *WNL* on Ludwig Boltzmann and Heinrich Hertz, the first two thinkers Wittgenstein mentions in the list of influences he drew up in 1931 (256). Wittgenstein's mathematical knowledge and engineering talent may have been as unimpressive as Potter argues (7, 9-10), but he was not scientifically uninformed. He was 22 when he arrived in Cambridge and his background in science was by no means negligible. Nor was the role of the physicist's notion of an abstract (coordinate) space of possibilities in his philosophy insignificant, to say nothing of the applied mathematician's conception of physical systems as having so many 'degrees of freedom' (84, 199).

While mostly valuable for understanding Wittgenstein's pre-*Tractatus* philosophy of logic, *WNL* also sheds light on the question of how the *Tractatus* itself should be read. Potter is surely right that however much Wittgenstein's wartime experience affected him personally, he did not change his philosophical spots in 1916 (247). All indications are, as Potter says, that 'the general principles that inform [the *Tractatus*] . . . already guid[e] Wittgenstein's work in the *Notes*' (254). And since the remarks in *NL* recycled in the *Tractatus* are, as Potter notes too, 'not there advanced ironically, "transitionally", or for purely literary effect,' we can be pretty confident that 'Wittgenstein did not always believe that the claims made in the text of the *Tractatus* were nonsense' (252).

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