

WITTGENSTEIN'S PRIMORDIAL WORK

JAMES CONNELLY
Philosophy / Trent U.
Peterborough, ON, Canada K9J 7B8
JAMESCONNELLY@TRENTU.CA

Michael Potter. *Wittgenstein's Notes on Logic*. Oxford and New York: Oxford U. P., 2009. Pp. [xii], 310. ISBN 978-0-19-921583-6. £37.00; US\$70.00.

Michael Potter's *Wittgenstein's Notes on Logic* is a painstakingly detailed scholarly study which blends philosophical insight with biographical and historical context to yield a deeper appreciation of the key themes informing Wittgenstein's philosophical development over his initial period of residence at Cambridge in 1911–13. Noting a surprising gap in the literature on Wittgenstein's philosophy (p. 3), Potter sets out to treat Wittgenstein's 1913 "Notes on Logic" (which consists of a succinct summary of the conclusions reached over this initial period) as an independent and primordial philosophical work. While it has been common for serious scholars of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to "mine" (p. 1) his pre-Tractarian writings in search of "remarks to support their interpretations" (p. 1) of that text, what sets Potter's study of the "Notes" apart from previous attempts at exegesis is a methodological determination to approach the "Notes" as "if not quite ... a terminus in Wittgenstein's work then at least as worthy of study in their own right" (p. 1).

An important advantage of this approach, according to Potter, is that it facilitates a clearer appreciation of Wittgenstein's lasting insights "into the central themes of philosophical logic" (p. 262), many of which Wittgenstein himself had already grasped by 1913 and which survive subsequent rejection of some of the less plausible aspects of the *Tractatus* (such as logical atomism and the picture theory of propositions). By presenting these key insights as *consequences* of central, but only subsequently adopted, Tractarian doctrines such as the picture theory, however, traditional Wittgenstein scholarship has missed an opportunity, uniquely important in the case of his philosophy (p. 1), to elucidate them against the background of the actual historical landscape of problems, strategies, motivations, and influences, within the context in which they were originally formulated. According to Potter, then, looking at the "Notes" as a finished work in its own right, as opposed to a mere collection of preparatory notes, will help us to understand better both the more thorough reasoning Wittgenstein worked through in developing these various insights (subsequently either suppressed or highly compressed in the final draft of the *Tractatus* itself), and just what further logical work that subsequently added elements, such as the picture theory, were supposed to contribute. Likewise, such an approach will help us to understand better the relevant influences upon Wittgenstein's philosophical development, such as those, obviously and respectively, of Frege and Russell.

Integral to distilling these various insights and influences from the "Notes", according to Potter, is the process of "dise ntangling" (p. 3) various extant versions of the text from one another, the distinct versions themselves arising from the "rather complicated circumstances" (p. 3) in which the "Notes" were composed. Following upon a lengthy explication of both the content and philosophical context of the "Notes", Potter therefore attempts to "reconstruct the circumstances of composition of Wittgenstein's first surviving philosophical work" (p. 263). This is achieved by engaging in some "historical detective work"

(p. 3), aimed at identifying and clarifying various crucial aspects of the “Notes” historical and biographical context. Along with an Appendix B containing two different versions of the “Notes” themselves (the “Cambridge” and “Birmingham” versions, respectively), Potter thus includes an Appendix A in which he develops several interesting conjectures, on the basis of the available evidence, regarding their origins, sources, and circumstances of composition. Notably, Potter claims that the (at one time) seemingly definitive so-called “Costello” version of Wittgenstein’s “Notes”¹ was in fact compiled principally by Russell (and later under his direction) over the course of 1914 from “two distinct texts of rather different characters” (p. 274). Russell’s extant labelling of the two distinct texts (that is, of the Cambridge and Birmingham versions reproduced in Appendix B) thus represents an intermediate stage of the “editing task” (p. 268) undertaken by Russell in preparation for his upcoming lectures on logic at Harvard (in the context of which he intended to use the “Notes”).

Among the central themes of philosophical logic developed in the “Notes” and dealt with by Potter in the main body of the text are included: Wittgenstein’s re-conception of philosophical analysis, his repudiation of logical objects, his symbolic turn, his critique of the assertion sign, his development of the distinction between complexes and facts, his analysis of logical form, and his treatment of logical types. In the interest of brevity, I will consider but one of these themes here in more detail, namely the distinction between complexes and facts. Simply put, according to Potter, the distinction is that: “A complex is an arrangement of things; that they are arranged in this way is a fact. A complex is thus something we can refer to by means of a description; we specify a fact, on the other hand, by means of a ‘that’ clause” (p. 102). According to Potter, this distinction “is one of the most important in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, and it pervades the *Notes on Logic*” (p. 102); it emerged for Wittgenstein in the context of an attempt to provide an alternative to the Russellian analysis of material objects, or complexes, in terms of logical construction. Russell had invoked the existence of complexes corresponding to true judgments in the context of his multiple-relation theory of judgment, but failed to clarify adequately how such complexes were distinct from the various facts they manifested (p. 103). Likewise, in attempting to account for knowledge of complexes with which we are not directly acquainted in terms of those with which we are, Russell had employed a theory of denoting which failed to clarify adequately how we are acquainted with the variable therein invoked, since it, presumably, and in turn, denotes (at least some) things with which we lack direct acquaintance (pp. 42–3).

¹ Reprinted in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961) pp. 93–107. The second edition (1979) has the so-called “Russell” version of the “Notes on Logic”, which Potter prints in a different arrangement.

Later, when he abandoned the notion that belief in material objects was justified on the grounds of an inference to the best explanation of our sense-data, and instead preferred to construct logical proxies for such objects *out of* sense-data, he became agnostic, according to Potter, about whether material complexes corresponding to these constructions existed. As “cautious men of science” (Potter, p. 40), we should follow Occam’s maxim to avoid multiplying ontological commitment beyond necessity; in particular, we should avoid positing theoretical un-observables (material complexes) beyond the sense-data employed in logical construction, since committing ourselves to such un-observables would unduly and unnecessarily expose our theory to error (pp. 40–1; cf. *Papers* 6: 512–13, *Papers* 8: 243).

Wittgenstein, by contrast, engaged in the fully “eliminative programme” (p. 44) of reducing statements about complexes to statements of fact, while simultaneously clarifying the one-many nature of the relationship between complexes and facts. On Russell’s view, we derive a judgment about the existence of a complex, a red circle, say, from direct perception of that complex; but as Wittgenstein later put the point in his *Philosophical Grammar*: “To say that a red circle is composed of redness and circularity, or is a complex with these component parts, is a misuse of words, and is misleading” (Potter, p. 104). But why is it misleading? According to Potter, this is because

on this [Wittgenstein’s] understanding of the distinction the correspondence between complexes and facts is one-many. One complex, that is to say, may exemplify several different facts.... The red circle in Wittgenstein’s example exemplifies the fact that it is red; but it also exemplifies the fact that it has a certain radius; and, too, that it occurs in a certain position in my field of vision. It is misleading to say that a red circle is a complex consisting of redness and circularity because it privileges a particular fact about it, namely that it is a red circle. But complexes do not speak: they are what they are, and do not present any particular facts as salient. Complexes, therefore, cannot be what ground propositional thought, because they do not have the right kind of structure to do so. Only facts can do that. (P. 104)

Individual complexes each exhibit many distinct facts, and thus it must be the facts they exemplify, not the complexes themselves, which make up the primitive logical scaffolding, or structure, of the world. This insight (which, according to Potter, was first suggested to Wittgenstein by Frege [p. 105]), subsequently finds its way into the *Tractatus* as Wittgenstein’s foundational remark that: “The world is the totality of facts, not of things” (1.1). Complexes, moreover, are nothing “over and above” the logical product (conjunction) of the facts which make them up, and hence Wittgenstein writes in the “Notes” (and later reiterates in *Tractatus* 2.0201) that:

Every proposition which seems to be about a complex can be analyzed into a proposition about its constituents and the propositions which describe the complex perfectly; i.e.,

that proposition which is equivalent to saying that the complex exists. (P. 286, C25)²

Russell's problematic agnosticism about the existence of material complexes corresponding to logical constructions was thus avoided *via* a rejection, on logical grounds, of the very question Russell had cautioned to be agnostic about. On Wittgenstein's view, it was not that we lack good evidence or justification either way; instead it literally lacks *sense* to ask whether a complex corresponding to the analysis existed "over and above" the facts given in the analysis. A complex just *is*, as a matter of logic, the sum of facts which constitute its complete description. This in turn obviates the need to explain our acquaintance with the variable invoked in Russell's theory of denoting, since on Wittgenstein's theory: "Propositions which appear to be about matter turn out on analysis to be about simples, and the variable is no longer required to act as a bridge between the parts of the world with which I am acquainted and those with which I am not (p. 44). On Wittgenstein's view, variables indicate logical prototypes which specify classes of propositions (pp. 177–8; p. 289, C49) that are, ultimately, truth functions of elementary propositions; knowing these propositions, in turn, in so far as it involves Russellian "acquaintance" at all, involves acquaintance with simple objects as opposed to Russellian variables. While by the time of the "Notes on Logic" Wittgenstein had yet to work out the metaphysics of logical atomism in full detail, he was nevertheless fully confident that the basic constituents of facts would turn out, in any case, to be "whatever can be symbolized by a simple proper name" (p. 64; *cf. Wittgenstein in Cambridge*, p. 38).

Potter's reading of Wittgenstein on the distinction between complexes and facts affords a good example of both the methodology employed, and impressive results obtained thereby, throughout the book. More specifically, in this and other cases, Potter identifies a particular theme in Wittgenstein's early philosophy and traces the development of that theme to its origins (whether *via* critical reaction or positive influence) in the thought of Russell or Frege. Integral connections between that theme and other important aspects of Wittgenstein's early philosophy are then thoughtfully and competently probed over the course of several topically distinct but thematically integrated chapters. On a first reading, Potter's book can come across as quite daunting in its impressive combination of painstaking detail and topical breadth. Moreover, its guiding heuristic ap-

² Wittgenstein's reference to "atomic complexes" (as opposed to "atomic facts") in a January 1913 letter to Russell (*Wittgenstein in Cambridge: Letters and Documents, 1911–1951*, ed. Brian McGuinness [Oxford: Blackwell, 2008], p. 38) would suggest that Wittgenstein must have arrived at a more robust eliminativism (of complexes in favour of facts) sometime after January 1913, but before the fall 1913 composition of the "Notes". Wittgenstein's preference for eliminativism in relation to complexes, further, and as this letter would suggest, also could not have come about as an immediate consequence, in any case, of his meeting with Frege in December 1912 (*ibid.*, p. 36).

proach to the “Notes” (that is, as constituting a self-unified and self-sustaining landmark in Wittgenstein’s thinking) can at times seem to be in tension with its presentation of them (and of the nature and circumstances of their composition) as highly fractured and inherently intermediate. Potter’s book is written at a level of technical and philosophical sophistication that is prohibitive to a novice reader; and even in the case of an advanced reader, there exists a real potential for him or her to become overwhelmed and disoriented for failure to perceive just how the various scholarly minutiae covered relate to the “big picture”, or overall narrative, that Potter is trying to construct. On a second or third reading, and as Potter’s methodology and purpose become clearer, the text instead rewards the reader with a wealth of historical, biographical, and philosophical source material carefully developed and organized so as to support that overall narrative in which, it becomes obvious, the various scholarly minutiae covered are thematically and logically integrated to a remarkable degree.

While traditional scholarship on Wittgenstein’s early thought addresses themes and connections of a similar sort, it addresses them primarily as manifest in views as articulated in the *Tractatus*. Potter instead aims to fill an important lacuna in the literature by focusing principally—though not exclusively—on their presentation in the “Notes”. By doing so, he is able to isolate key logical insights, such as the distinction between complexes and facts, and in turn to relate them more directly to the problem-setting context in which they were originally formulated. Fascinating connections are then drawn between these insights, their problem-setting context, and other important landmarks in Wittgenstein’s philosophical development. The whole of this wealth of philosophical content is then integrated into a highly illuminating historical and biographical narrative, relatively uncoloured by the dominating presence of Wittgenstein’s early masterpiece, the *Tractatus*. Overall, and in light of the wealth of thematically integrated and painstakingly researched historical, biographical, and philosophical information it contains, Potter’s book is a rather impressive accomplishment in early analytic scholarship.
