

## *Contextual Metaphilosophy: The Case of Wittgenstein*

by Dimitris Gakis (Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2012)

A review by Dr. Michael D. Rose

This book argues diligently for a context-aware reading of Wittgenstein as a case study for contextual metaphilosophy. The latter term indicates a proposed approach that ‘at the level of philosophy as a discipline ... means the treatment of philosophy as a practice interwoven with the rest of the nexus of human praxis’ (21). Rather than treating philosophy as the search for eternal verities or doctrines, stress is laid on the individuals and movements that contribute to its history, their social and political settings. Establishing a useful concept of contextual metaphilosophy constitutes the first part of the book. It thus speaks to the widening recognition within analytic philosophy (partly through Wittgenstein’s influence) that philosophy is a human activity with a history and a set of negotiated disciplinary or generic approaches, rather than a body of knowledge independent of its culture of production. It remains, however, a matter of considerable debate to what extent a philosopher’s ideas ought to be separable from factors such as style, upbringing, tradition and more indirect forms of intertextuality. Appropriately, the book’s second part performs a demonstration of this approach by providing a detailed account of Wittgenstein’s background, influences and intellectual engagements, while giving a parallel discussion of some of the major interpretations of his work.

In setting up contextual metaphilosophy, Dimitris Gakis argues for an application of Kuhn’s historical perspective on the natural sciences to the discipline of philosophy. It is suggested that adopting a historically and socially sensitive perspective permits us to chart and evaluate change without committing to notions of perpetual progress or unobtainable objectivity, while leaving open the possibility of paying due attention to differences between the methods, institutions and remits of philosophy and the sciences. For example, while philosophy does appear to go through paradigm shifts in a similar fashion to the natural sciences (of which the linguistic turn might be one instance),

humanities disciplines are able to accommodate multiple and rival paradigms simultaneously, and indeed thrive through such conflicts. In part, this book provides a demonstration of how such negotiations between paradigms can have an influence far beyond their supposed enclaves, drawing connections between Wittgenstein and areas of Continental or leftwing philosophy and politics with which his known associations are indirect or partial.

The historical paradigm model seeks to relieve us of the idea that philosophy (or science) is a teleologically progressing search for 'truth', instead treating it as an interest-driven activity that seeks to respond to specific challenges, technologies and traditions. If philosophy can be regarded neither as a continual development and refinement towards some overall goal or state of affairs, nor as a series of sudden and independent revelations within the works of individuals, we may be better situated to engage in metaphilosophy, of a descriptive and contextual rather than a prescriptive kind. Philosophy is thus conceived of as a discipline that is 'not exclusively defined in itself, but an open-ended, dynamic, and dialectical (i.e. conversational and transformational) human practice in a constant interaction with the rest of human activity' (52). Kuhn's paradigm shift helps to frame this ambition, since it depicts key moments of change as responses to the pressures of the time – both within the subject and in the surrounding culture.

Although only a part of what make Kuhn's model attractive for this endeavour, the concept of paradigm does neatly illustrate both the approach recommended and the indebtedness of Kuhn to Wittgenstein's later work. An comparison is made (38) between different meanings of 'paradigm', where Wittgenstein's telling examples, frames of reference, or means of representation stand in contrast to the term's use as a constrictive or prescriptive framework to which what is under discussion is expected to comply. There are definite similarities between Kuhn's anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist and non-accumulative attempt to describe the natural sciences as emerging from the continuing and self-substantiating activities of human individuals and communities, and the later Wittgenstein's treatment of philosophy as a therapy in which the individual's whole life is involved (and in which the notion of progress becomes either misguided or localised). Further, while Wittgenstein's profile and direct influence in philosophy has waxed and waned within its various sub-

disciplines over recent decades, the questions he raises about what it is to 'do' philosophy remain increasingly pertinent. Not only is the discipline under continual self-scrutiny and subject to professionalization within the academy, but the considerations of philosophers have shifted, particularly in recent years, towards the social, the technological and the bodily. Paradigms of how and when to philosophize have been disputed and transformed. A key implication of Gakis' metaphilosophical approach is that these changes can be understood through a descriptive and inclusive methodology, which will in turn equip us to understand and apply anew the work created within specific contexts.

Wittgenstein presents a natural case study for this kind of discussion, partly because of his aforementioned influence on the notion of paradigm being used, and partly because similar debates already exist in the interpretation of his work. So neat is the fit between Wittgenstein and this project that Gakis pre-empts charges of circularity in the introduction (8), not unreasonably noting that even if contextual metaphilosophy is remarkably close to Wittgenstein's own remarks on the nature of philosophy, this need not mean that there is a perfect match between the philosopher's claims and his own context and practice. More so than almost any other philosopher claimed by the analytic tradition, Wittgenstein's personality, method and style of writing are discussed as part and parcel of his philosophy (see Kahane and Kanterian, eds. *Wittgenstein and His Interpreters*. Blackwell, 2007). Given his injunction against philosophical theorising, his ambivalence towards philosophy as an activity and a profession, and his great emphasis on form and style in his works, it is debatable to what extent we can separate his ideas from his way of writing, and his writing from his life generally. His entire practice and appeal might be bound up in a confessional and personal (anti)philosophy, if one follows Alan Badiou's characterisation of his stance towards the Western tradition (*Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*. Verso, 2011). This is only complicated by the posthumous editing and publishing of his notes and the recorded remarks of others, which nonetheless have attempted to preserve his unique and striking facility with ideas and images. Like understanding a language, approaching Wittgenstein may require involving oneself with an entire form of life.

The later chapters of the book focus on Wittgenstein's background, his relationship to modernity and modernism, the reconciliation of standard and resolute readings of the *Tractatus* with his contemporary experience and writing, his later 'anti-essentialist, anti-foundationalist, anti-scientistic and anti-dogmatic' strands of humanism (206), and finally his often overlooked political views and parallels with Marxian thought. As a whole this is an accomplished and approachable history of Wittgenstein as a man and a philosopher, making some valuable additions to existing accounts, for example by refining his relationship with differing forms and exponents of modernism. A significant point is also made, that while Wittgenstein's ethical concerns are integral to his work, the latter is not reducible to the former, which some contextualist studies (including Janik and Toulmin's seminal *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, 1973) are accused of doing. Of particular use is the final chapter, which seeks to associate Wittgenstein's generally leftist (but not orthodox) views with an ethically-underpinned protest against the dehumanisation of the modern individual through various forms of reification (linguistic and scientific); parallels drawn with humanist Marxism on this basis are insightful, and also add to how we might understand Wittgenstein's relationship with leftist thinkers in Cambridge at the time, particularly Piero Sraffa (237-240). Although the section does somewhat underplay the very profound differences between what Marx and Wittgenstein sought to accomplish, and the means by which their ideas have been carried forward, this discussion brings out a side of Wittgenstein's life that has not been explored sufficiently before. The comparison made between Wittgenstein's attitude toward Marxism and his recorded views about Freud is also instructive; where Freud was regarded as a great challenger to a complacent worldview who was still in thrall to a reductive and scientific understanding of explanation, Marx may have been (perhaps via Sraffa) a gateway to communitarian and materialist thinking but ultimately committed to an excessively causal and determinate idea of history and human nature.

The section on different readings of the *Tractatus* presents a coherent case for the standard view, with the problems of the radical break between the 'two Wittgensteins' ameliorated by a continuous thread of ethical concern running throughout his philosophical writing, though reformulated to meet the conditions and challenges of life and thought at different stages. In fact, Wittgenstein's work is

generally conceived by Gakis as driven by an ethics of self-clarification and human autonomy. A question remains about whether the standard view as given here really is the best account available for charting Wittgenstein's thinking as *developing* (rather than disguisedly continuous or fundamentally discontinuous); Daniel D. Hutto's account in *Wittgenstein and the End of Philosophy* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2003) might have suited better, in which Wittgenstein's rejection of his earlier work is depicted as emerging from his realisation that that he had not at the time been able to express with sense what his intellectual framework insisted that he must; his later work found a means not of expressing that apparent necessity, but of clarifying and disarming the (recurring, frustrated) urge to do so. Whether this is a purely 'negative' conception of Wittgenstein's method, or whether there is room in this or other readings for a more 'positive' view naturally has further implications. Gakis correctly notes that the 'positive' possibilities of Wittgenstein's anti-essentialist programme have been more readily accommodated by Continental readers than analytic ones bearing the 'burden of scholasticism' (173), which provides an introduction to the closing chapters of the book.

The conclusion to the book is compelling if somewhat brief, concentrating on a call to view Wittgenstein's work as an expression of an ethical project of self-aware self-constitution by the acting human self and community – a motivation grounded in Wittgenstein's personal experience and intellectual engagements. This is a powerful reading that deserves further expression elsewhere, and might be fleshed out through reference to Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, in which the construction and understanding of ritual, communal behaviour and natural history are foregrounded. A more sustained return to the Kuhnian framing mechanism of contextual metaphilosophy might have given greater impetus to repeating the case study elsewhere in philosophy. How might much less biographically or stylistically notable philosophers respond to this kind of exegesis? To what extent is the continued concentration on Wittgenstein the individual, as opposed to philosophical schools, institutions and languages, justified within the historically and socially oriented perspective of Kuhn's model? Although much worthwhile attention is paid to the later Wittgenstein's anthropological vocabulary here, one may ask (while acknowledging the risk of ceasing to do

philosophy in favour of sociology) whether the notion of context has been pushed far enough in this direction.

Overall this is a comprehensive and well-organised book that will be of great assistance for anyone seeking to understand Wittgenstein's personal and intellectual history; it performs a skilfully integrated reading of his philosophy and biography. The work done to contextualise his philosophy within twentieth-century thought and culture is considerable and on several points original.

--- References

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