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Wittgenstein reads Weininger

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In 1931 Wittgenstein made a list of ten people he considered himself to be influenced by. This list – consisting of Boltzmann, Hertz, Schopenhauer, Frege, Russell, Kraus, Loos, Weininger, Spengler and Sraffa – is the most important piece of evidence linking Wittgenstein to Otto Weininger (p. 1). The second important piece of evidence is a somewhat cryptic remark Wittgenstein made to G.E. Moore, to whom he recommended reading Weininger's *Sex and Character* the same year. In correspondence Moore expressed disapproval of the book to which Wittgenstein replied that if one put a negation sign in front of the entire book, then it would yield “an important truth” (p. 2). Weininger is also mentioned several times in Wittgenstein's notebooks, his correspondence, and in recorded conversations. The editors David Stern and Béla Szabados convincingly argue for the possibility of a philosophically interesting connection between Wittgenstein and Weininger and present a survey of the relevant evidence for this. *Wittgenstein reads Weininger* promises to explore the “idea that Weininger was an important positive philosophical influence on Wittgenstein” (p. 17).

Nowadays, Weininger is known mostly for two things. His ostensibly misogynistic and anti-Semitic ideas developed in his book *Sex and Character* – a project he calls “characterology”. And for his suicide as a young man in 1903. But as Steven Burns points out in his contribution *Sex and Solipsism*: “*Sex and Character* soon became notorious, not for its author's dramatic demise or for what strikes us today as its antifeminism and anti-Semitism, but for its embodiment of what struck fin-de-siècle Vienna as genius.” (p. 89) The first part of Burns' essay is a detailed investigation of Weininger's commentary on Henryk Ibsen's poem *Peer Gynt*. This commentary appears in the collection of Weininger's work published as *On last Things*. Burns argues that Weininger here develops his own version of a Kantian moral philosophy, which has the contrast between the “genius” and the “criminal”, as well as their respective autonomy and lack thereof, at its centre. He also connects this to Weininger's theory of sexuality. In the second part of his contribution, Burns relates these ideas to Wittgenstein. He argues that they influenced Wittgenstein's ethical outlook, and eventually also informed his philosophy, in particular his eventual rejection of solipsism. The evidence Burns

presents for this connection is rather thin, and rarely goes beyond loose associations, of which the following will give an impression: “Solipsistic sex, if I may put it this way, is conducted in a logically private language; there is no verifiable communication with another person in the sex act, no intercourse.” (p. 101) On the one hand, *Sex and Solipsism* is a strong essay about Weininger, whose text receives detailed analysis. But on the other, it is a weak essay about Wittgenstein, who is reduced to a few quotes. Unfortunately, this is characteristic of *Wittgenstein reads Weininger*.

Though the title *Wittgenstein reads Weininger* suggests otherwise, this is not – and is not intended to be – a book chiefly about Wittgenstein. Instead, a large portion of the book is an attempt to: “contribute to the project of understanding Weininger’s reception, addressing both his cultural and intellectual significance and the fact that his work continues to provoke such extreme responses.” (p. 9) This is not to say that the contributions do not aim at achieving a better understanding of Wittgenstein. But this is done less by detailed analysis and comparison of Wittgenstein’s work with Weininger’s than by placing Wittgenstein within certain lines of philosophical development, informed by the fact that Wittgenstein read and appreciated Weininger.

The editors give a methodological reason for this focus on Weininger. They criticize past attempts for failing to appreciate the impact Weininger had on Wittgenstein’s philosophy (p. 14), and attribute these perceived failures to a premature condemnation of Weininger’s work, as well as a failure to understand Wittgenstein and Weininger in their proper historical context. Schulte is particularly careful about distinguishing genuine Weiningerian influences on Wittgenstein from commonplace ideas in early 19th century Vienna. Doing this presents one of the main challenges for this investigation. Wittgenstein rarely explicitly acknowledged his intellectual debts and Weininger collected and synthesised quotes and ideas from a wide range of writers. Schopenhauer, for example, clearly influenced Weininger and was included alongside Weininger on Wittgenstein’s list. Schulte achieves this separation by focusing on Weininger’s comments on the unidirectionality of time which he argues represent original Weiningerian thought. Schulte analyses passages from Wittgenstein’s notebooks which show that Wittgenstein was concerned with this aspect of Weininger’s thought in December of 1916. Though, as Schulte himself points out, these passages did not survive into the *Tractatus* and it would be difficult to reconstruct their impact on the finished book (p. 132). I think Schulte’s contribution and Stern’s *Weininger and Wittgenstein on Animal Psychology* are the two most convincing essays.

By focussing on a single topic that is treated at considerable length by Weininger and by Wittgenstein, Stern has the most extensive evidence to work with. At first glance, the treatment of animal psychology in both philosophers seems at most superficially related. Wittgenstein does seem to choose similar examples to Weininger which indicates familiarity with Weininger's ideas. But in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein seems concerned with the possibility of attributing intentionality to animals. Weininger on the other hand integrates his treatment of animals into his semiotic theory and claims that all animals have symbolic meaning, his main example being the dog as a symbol of the criminal. Stern argues that both approaches are connected by certain post-Kantian concerns which he develops by comparison with passages from the work of G. C. Lichtenberg. Stern concludes that Wittgenstein's treatment of animals was at least in part a criticism of Weininger and that Wittgenstein tried to "help us to see the dangers in taking man to be the measure of all things." (p.190).

Szabados' *Eggshells or Nourishing Yolk?* encapsulates my main problem with the volume as a whole. The result of Szabados' investigation is twofold: On the one hand, he construes Weininger's influence on Wittgenstein as primarily negative: "The important truth that the negation of Weininger's book yields is a method that dispenses with essentialist prototypes, which are the sources of dogmatism and prejudice, a method that urges us to look and see how persons and things really are." (p. 35) On the other hand, Weininger supposedly influenced Wittgenstein's methodology: "The Weiningerian approach is adopted, and adapted, to Wittgenstein's concerns about language" (p.50) Szabados acknowledges the tension between these theses and admits that he does not have a satisfactory answer to this. He suggests that there are really two Weiningers. There is the well-known essentialist Weininger with his focus Platonic ideas. And "[o]n the other hand, there is the little-known but deep Weininger: anti-scientistic, anti-essentialist, whose actual work shows a struggle to attend and do justice to particularity and difference." (p. 59) Szabados focuses on this second, subtler interpretation of Weininger but this undermines his claim to have made sense of Wittgenstein's remark to Moore about negating Weininger's work (p. 35) The more relevant criticism is that reading Weininger both ways, as a staunch Platonist and a radical anti-essentialist, makes the investigation very vague and seems to allow everything and nothing to count as Weiningerian influence.

Partly starting from the mentioned Kantian themes, several essays reassess Wittgenstein's place in the history of philosophy. Janik for example, takes Weininger to show connections between Wittgenstein and thinkers not typically associated with him:

It is precisely at the point [1916; dh] where Wittgenstein begins to 'produce' that connection [between his personal and his philosophical concerns; dh], as we shall see, that Otto Weininger started to

become philosophically important to him. What is more, it is precisely here that the points of contact between Wittgenstein and so-called ‘Continental philosophers’ such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, and Martin Heidegger emerge. (p. 62)

Janik traces certain parallels between Wittgenstein and Heidegger. He claims for example that in the *Tractatus* “the application of the Sheffer stroke [...] somehow provided Wittgenstein with the key to understanding both logic and ethics.” (p. 76) He develops this idea further and concludes that this meant for Wittgenstein “that the world is neither a happy nor unhappy world” (p. 76). This in turn supposedly expresses the same idea that Heidegger expresses with the concept “Jenseitigkeit der Welt” (p. 76). Far-reaching conclusions of this kind need to be supported but apart from a reference to *Sein und Zeit* no evidence is provided. It would take more to convince me of this link between Wittgenstein and the “South-West German School of Neo-Kantianism” (p. 87). Unfortunately, this is just an extreme example of the degree of speculation commonly found in *Wittgenstein reads Weininger*.

This leads to the most obvious question that needs to be addressed when discussing Weininger – his manifest misogyny and anti-Semitism. Most readers of a book called *Wittgenstein reads Weininger* will probably expect a detailed discussion of this topic – though they would be disappointed. Weininger’s positions are mentioned in all essays but never in detail. None of the contributors deny this aspect of Weininger’s thought, although the interpretations of Weininger presented here do strike me as exceedingly charitable. Szabados for example reads Weininger as using “the idea of projection to explain the prevalent forms of social malaise, such as misogyny, homophobia, and anti-Semitism [...]” (p. 47) Burns on the other hand maintains that Weininger’s views on Judaism and women are widely misunderstood because his remarks change their meaning in the context of his theory (p. 93). Janik points out that “many ‘intentionalist’ intellectual historians of totalitarian movements” (p. 64) have failed to appreciate that seemingly anti-Semitic or misogynistic remarks by philosophers were in fact used quite innocently, their meaning changed by the context of their work and the times they were writing in. Szabados also emphasises that Wittgenstein does not agree with Weininger’s misogynist and racist outlook, (p. 33) and so do the other contributors. But Wittgenstein’s views on this aspect of Weininger are not systematically addressed. It is possible that certain images, phrases or concepts employed by Weininger and Wittgenstein need not and should not be taken literally. But this should be shown, not just claimed.

Would I recommend *Wittgenstein reads Weininger*? I can recommend the volume to someone whose main interest is in Weininger and who has some knowledge of Wittgenstein’s work. The comparison with Wittgenstein might show interesting ways, in which Weininger’s thought could be made fruitful in the future.

However, I cannot recommend *Wittgenstein reads Weininger* to a reader mainly interested in the philosophy of Wittgenstein. Some of the essays succeed in highlighting the cultural and intellectual context Wittgenstein grew up in. And this may help to understand Wittgenstein as a person and why certain topics, like the psychology of animals, were important to him. But the arguments presented here are rarely concise enough to challenge one's understanding of Wittgenstein's actual arguments. One may agree with the associations and topical links between Wittgenstein and Weininger presented here or one may not. What is missing are tests to decide if and how Weininger influenced Wittgenstein. Such a test could be an interpretation of a significant aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy that is only plausible because it is informed by the comparison with Weininger. Janik's previously discussed interpretation of the *Tractatus* is an example of this, though I did not find it convincing. But in this respect, Janik's contribution is exceptional. This is not to say that the connections between Weininger and Wittgenstein are not there. Many of the contributions succeed in presenting a good argument that Wittgenstein's methodology and even substantial philosophical positions might be informed by his understanding of Weininger. But they fail to show more than mere possibilities. At the end of their introduction, the editors formulate the project of *Wittgenstein reads Weininger* more cautiously than in the passage quoted earlier. The volume is supposed to "illuminate[] [...] a particular moment in the history of philosophy" and "present connections between philosophy and history that we might otherwise be prevented from seeing." (p. 22) Given the available textual evidence, it may be unreasonable to expect any more than this.