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Nota Bene

Report on the 36th Annual Wittgenstein Symposium in Kirchberg am Wechsel on 11-17 August 2013

by Keith Farman

Few philosophers of the last 100 years could attract more than 130 students and teachers from 6 continents to spend a week exploring and developing the thought of a man who has been dead for 62 years. That such a body of profound, elusive and endlessly challenging ideas still yields valuable, relevant insights both within and beyond the esoteric boundaries of academic philosophy is further testimony to the unique, iconoclastic thinker that was Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein.

This was my first visit to Kirchberg in Lower Austria where the 36th annual Wittgenstein Symposium run by the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society benefitted from the committed and valuable input of the British Wittgenstein Society led by Danièle Moyal-Sharrock.

Many of the most authoritative and discriminating Wittgenstein scholars in the world gathered with some of the most talented young minds in contemporary philosophy: united in their belief in the enduring value of Wittgenstein’s thought but distinguished by an extraordinarily wide range of diverse interests, disciplines and areas of research and teaching – from Mahler to Memory; Enactivism to Psychotherapy; and of course, traditional categories like Mind, Ethics and the acquisition and use of Language.

If this all sounds a bit intense and heavy, think again. The diversity of nations, cultures and
personalities was a delight to share and not without many lighter, even hilarious moments, some, it must be said, unwitting, ranging from the slightly surreal to the frankly bizarre – like the deadly serious gentleman offering a paper of 30 unbroken minutes of assiduously linked syllogisms delivered with a determined rat-a-tat rhythm that would have impressed even Mr Capone and his henchmen. A wise guy indeed.

As one might expect, the administration and organisation of our Austrian hosts was impeccably efficient and delivered with an unhurried calm authority that disarmed any practical worries; leaving us to relax and enjoy the conference to the full.

The pitfall Wittgenstein can sometimes present, of an overly reverential, hagiographical approach, was safely avoided and it was appropriate that the challenging thought of eminent names of the past like Elizabeth Anscombe, no unquestioning disciple she, was adduced to subject Wittgenstein’s ideas to the most rigorous examination: they benefit most from nothing less.

Still reeling at the beginning of the first full day, from the combined effects of British Airways in-flight food and the stark realisation that each conference day required judicious choices from 38 startlingly diverse papers, my brain retired hurt half way through the afternoon and I took early benefit from the restorative effects of Austrian beer, wine and snacks the organisers had thoughtfully laid on. However, suitably forewarned and now armed with the defensive insight that the week was going to be an intellectual marathon rather than a sprint, I approached day 2 with confidence – physically refreshed and intellectually as my children might put it – ‘up for it’.

Tentatively, but with I thought nicely nuanced discrimination, I picked a path on Tuesday through, among others, the familiar signposts of Intention, Memory and Agency; with a momentary Wittgensteinian shudder at a brief brush with Metaphysics. Another tactical insight emerged: that the relationship between the catchy title of a talk and its depth and rigour – was often inverse. Laurence Goldstein’s excellent paper on Philosophical Logic and The Tractatus was a good case in point.

The next day devoted to Memory, caught me unawares and conjured many friendly, if intellectually intimidating ghosts from my Philosophical past: among others Rush Rhees, Elizabeth Anscombe, Bernard Williams, Gilbert Ryle, Norman Malcolm, Richard Wollheim, John Wisdom – and most of all Peter Winch. If my direct contact with many of these great minds was fleeting and impersonal; vivid personal memories of many hours and days discussing with Peter Winch the very issues still challenging us on this brilliantly sunny day in Austria 2013, returned evocatively, if unbidden, to mind. Memories of friendship, empathy and the privileged intimacy of true connection with another, very special mind were entirely apposite; as part of the unique effect of studying Wittgenstein and his very personal way of expressing his thought is a very satisfying sense of a shared recognition: much as we find with a finely drawn, truthful character in a great novel; or the perfect phrase in a fine poem or admired piece of music.

An evening visit to a small exhibition in Trattenbach where Wittgenstein first taught Primary schoolchildren in 1920, enjoyably combined with an al fresco wine-tasting, had a parochial, rural village charm with a formally correct civic welcome from the Mayor and a refreshingly frank description of the great philosopher’s less than complimentary comments about the locals. An antipathy that, one gathers, was justifiably mutual.

If you get the chance to go to Kirchberg – do it. It represents and celebrates a continuity of commitment and passion of a quite unique thinker who will always challenge and inspire anyone with a commitment to understanding not just what things mean, but what it is to mean anything.
BWS Sponsor

We are delighted to announce that the British Wittgenstein Society is now supported by the Stanhill Foundation. The Stanhill Foundation is committed to promoting and enhancing the value of education throughout the UK and internationally. We are immensely grateful for their generous sponsorship.

Wittgenstein Postings

Avrum Stroll

It is with great sadness that I convey the news of the death of Professor Avrum Stroll on 12 September. Avrum Stroll was Emeritus Research Professor at the University of California, San Diego. A distinguished philosopher in the philosophy of language and epistemology, Avrum was also an exceptional Wittgenstein scholar who pioneered our understanding of On Certainty. He was my mentor, and a great personal friend. He will be missed by all those who knew him. Please see my longer obituary.

Danièle Moyal-Sharrock

Chinese Wittgenstein Society

We are delighted to announce the establishment of the Chinese Wittgenstein Society. The Inaugural Meeting was held this month during the International Conference on Wittgenstein and Contemporary Philosophy at Beijing Normal University. Under the picture of the delegates is part of the CWS mission statement.
The Chinese Wittgenstein Society (CWS) aims to promote research on Wittgenstein’s philosophy by translating and introducing Wittgenstein’s works in China and encouraging the academic exchange of ideas between scholars from China and all over the world. CWS is committed to reading and discussing Wittgenstein’s works and manuscripts, organising academic forums and lectures, and publishing new research on Wittgenstein’s philosophy in the form of journal articles and monographs. It will hold annual conferences on the topics of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. In the meantime, CWS will keep a close eye on the research of the relationship between Wittgensteinian philosophy and other areas of contemporary philosophy. ... Today, Wittgenstein Societies in different countries are increasingly interconnected. As a new member of a large academic family, we hope that the establishment of the Chinese Wittgenstein Society will contribute to a more stable, extensive and in-depth interaction for both national and international academic circles. In particular, we hope that the Chinese Wittgenstein Society may inject new vitality into the international research community.

For membership, email: wittgenstein.society.cn@hotmail.com
Congratulations and all success to the new society. The BWS looks forward to future collaboration with the CWS.

Conferences

**Sixth BWS Annual Conference: Wittgenstein and Epistemology**

*5-6 June 2014*

Hosted by the Eidyn Research Centre
Conference organisers: Prof. Duncan Pritchard & Dr. J. Adam Carter

Confirmed speakers:

- Annalisa Coliva (Modena)
- John Greco (St.Louis)
- Allan Hazlett (Edinburgh)
- Martin Kusch (Vienna)
- Michael P. Lynch (Connecticut)
- Denis Mcmanus (Southampton)
- Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (Hertfordshire)
- Dr Genia Schönbaumsfeld (Southampton)
- Michael Williams (Johns Hopkins)

Registration is now open, at: [https://sites.google.com/site/bws2014edinburgh/](https://sites.google.com/site/bws2014edinburgh/)

We look forward to seeing you at Edinburgh in June.

The Lecture Series

*The next in the BWS lecture series are:*

**21 May 2014: Professor Charles Altieri**  
*Title:* Why Wittgenstein on Expression matters for the Arts,

**Autumn 2014: Professor Gavin Kitching**  
*Title:* 'What is the use of my teaching you these techniques...?': Contemporary Wittgensteinian Philosophy and the Really Rough Ground of Politics

All lectures will be followed by a wine reception. These are complimentary, but advance registration is required once the announcement has been sent, so do check back to the website for details.
Housekeeping

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