7th BWS Conference on Wittgenstein and the Social Sciences. Report by Christopher Winch, Professor of Educational Philosophy and Policy, KCL

Wittgenstein did not write directly about the social sciences, apart from some scattered remarks, but his later work has long been thought of as central to an appraisal of the social sciences as a family of disciplines, notably through the influence of the work of Peter Winch. John Searle opened the proceedings with an outline of his influential Austin-based account of the use of language and the project of the development of a panoramic overview of human communication.

Discussion revealed the contrast between the Austinian attempt at an overview and the Wittgensteinian project of purpose- and context-related investigations of language use related to particular philosophical puzzles. Jeff Coulter’s talk dealt with whether philosophy ‘leaves everything as it is’, and emphasised the importance of ensuring that rule-governed action is to be understood in terms of context and purpose. He cautioned against
thinking of Wittgenstein as a straightforward conventionalist in terms of human institutions. Albert Ogien’s presentation dealt with the relationships between Durkheim and Wittgenstein and gave an extended comparison of these two thinkers.

James Thompson discussed recent theoretical conceptions of human practice and related these to a Wittgensteinian conception of social institutions, emphasizing the difficulties of introducing technical concepts into the study of social phenomena. John Dupré’s discussion of the relationship between the natural and the social sciences emphasised both the ‘messiness’ of the natural sciences, drawing on examples from biology, and the continuities between the natural and the social sciences. His provocative and well-constructed paper led to a lively discussion, which touched on some of the themes dealt with by Peter Winch concerning the need for an internally-based understanding of social phenomena. Rai Gaita’s Simone Weil influenced presentation broached the common accusation against Wittgenstein that he was a relativist. Using ideas derived from Weil, Gaita pondered what can be extracted from the idea of a common humanity (itself reinforced by anthropology), and outlined the idea of limit concepts in studying human phenomena, a theme Winch had also pursued under the inspiration of Vico’s ‘New Science’.

Savina Lovibond’s presentation focused on Wittgenstein’s critical view of progress (also a theme of Weil’s), drawing on material in *Culture and Value*. She drew parallels between Tolstoyan and Wittgensteinian outlooks on the modern world and emphasised the importance of both ascetic and aesthetic dimensions in Wittgenstein’s interpretation of his contemporary world. John Gunnell raised the question of realism and the universality of criteria of rationality, asking to what extent Wittgenstein’s realism also involved rationalism and whether the transformation of culturally-based beliefs had to depend on rational argumentation in the sense in which that is understood in the modern west. He criticised some of Cora Diamond’s reformulations of Wittgenstein’s views on this issue. This session led to a lively and illuminating discussion of the role of argumentation and persuasion in changing beliefs. Peter Hacker presented a scholarly and penetrating analysis of Wittgenstein’s employment of the concept of a form of life, sometimes thought to be critical to an understanding of the relevance of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy to our understanding of human society. He emphasised the anthropological approach Wittgenstein took in drawing attention to the role of established practices or forms of life in undergirding judgement and rule-following. William Kitchen concluded proceedings with an interpretation of how Wittgenstein’s philosophy might affect our understanding of the institution of education.

As usual the annual conference presented papers representing a variety of points of view, provoking engagement with the relevance of Wittgenstein’s work for issues of contemporary debate. A noteworthy feature of this year’s conference was the interdisciplinary nature of the contributions.

13th BWS Lecture

At the 13th BWS Lecture on 12 May 2015, the speaker was Dr Mikel Burley whose subject was *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion: Beyond Fideism and Atheism*.

A summer’s evening in the heart of London saw a marvellously lucid lecture to a large audience from Dr Mikel Burley on Wittgenstein’s philosophy and religion. Burley began with a survey of existing interpretations of Wittgenstein’s thoughts on religion. Some see him as trying to protect a faith he could not share – a kind of Fideism. Others see his approach as tending to atheism because regarding religion as a thoroughly human expression of a thoroughly human nature, and a final group, that his views should leave our own religious beliefs untouched with an attendant risk of putting religion beyond criticism. It was important to adjudicate between these interpretations since such exegetical divergence seems to cast doubt on the question of whether a consistent interpretation of Wittgenstein’s thought was possible at all. Moreover, Burley’s overarching claim was that to adjudicate between these interpretations is to think seriously about the more general relation between philosophy and religion. We seem faced with a choice between fideism, atheistic naturalism and quietism.

Burley’s first claim was that the term Fideism is systematically ambiguous. After tracing the history of the term, he argued that in discussing Fideism in general and Wittgensteinian Fideism in particular, we should distinguish a principle of non-interference from a principle of incomprehensibility. The first principle, that philosophical
inquiry’s primary purpose is to describe religious understanding, is benign and in accordance with more general directions in Wittgenstein’s thought. But the second claim – that religious language could only be understood by those who are already on the inside of religious life – Burly thought both false and pernicious. He showed how the account we find in DZ Phillips fails to acknowledge this distinction. Still, the ambiguity was such that Fideism was a term best avoided if not for the reasons that Phillips offered.

A second claim concerned the question of whether Wittgenstein’s non-reductive naturalism should be thought to lead to atheism. Here, Burley identified a crucial assumption: that transcendental beliefs about God, miracles, the life eternal must be matter of surface grammar and cannot be part of a naturalistic conception of human life. Thus it is one thing to have natural, instinctive reactions to say mountains and skies but quite another to regard such mountains as, say the home of the Gods or the sky as the vault of heaven.

Burley’s central claim, and a very illuminating one, was that this assumption is at odds with Wittgenstein’s claim that, in relation to our practice, our deeds, language is a refinement. For Wittgenstein’s claim was precisely not that language does something entirely new but only that it gives new shape to something already present. To be sure, in the beginning are deeds. But the question is then what kind of shape these deeds have. Burley argued that there is no warrant for assuming that, upstream as it were, our deeds, our practices, our ways of going on, are so crudely shaped that they need only be described in general naturalistic ways, free from concepts, which, downstream, we recognise as contemplative, spiritual, religious.

In the lively discussion that followed, questions focussed on the definition of religion, and the relation between religious utterances and truth. Perhaps not so fully explored was the more general question of the scope of Burley’s central claim: that the concepts we call religious or spiritual might be required to describe at least some of our ‘primitive’ pre-propositional responses and reactions. What would we make of the claim that some of our primitive responses might have to be described, downstream, as 'aesthetic', 'ethical' or even 'scientific'? And if we reject such possibilities, what kind of differences are there between these domains such that the move is legitimate in some cases but not in others?

Perhaps the speaker will be actively pursuing these questions in future research. But in this lecture, Mikel Burley very successfully substantiated his claim that in getting clearer about Wittgenstein’s approach to religion and, in particular, by passing overly crude dichotomies and conflations, we become clearer about the correct way to understand his more general thought about language, meaning and practice. The enthusiastic appreciation of this central London audience was well deserved.

Watch the video of this lecture on this link.

Upcoming Events

27-29 July
**Orientations Towards Wittgenstein**
Philosophy of Education of Great Britain
Gregynog, Wales, UK

9-15 August
**38th International Wittgenstein Symposium: Realism - Relativism - Constructivism**
Registration now open
Kirchberg am Wechsel, Austria

Check the [Upcoming Events page](http://www.editor.net/BWS/newsletter/newsletter23.htm) on the BWS website for a more comprehensive list of forthcoming Wittgenstein-related events.

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The Restoration of Wittgenstein's Ledger Stone

As BWS members will know, Wittgenstein’s grave, in Ascension Parish Burial Ground in Cambridge, is marked by a plain and simple ledger stone with only his name and dates. It is a beautiful tranquil spot though not too easy to find.

Even so, according to the parish, the grave receives more than hundred visitors a year. The burial ground contains the graves of many other famous figures from Cambridge some of whom have connections of various kinds with Wittgenstein including, Sir James Frazer, G.E.Moore, John Wisdom and of course Elisabeth Anscombe. Wittgenstein’s grave remains the most frequently asked for and visited site.

The Society was aware that the ledger stone was beginning to look stained, the stone tarnished and the lettering beginning to wear with a danger of becoming illegible. Several reports from BWS members in the summer of 2014 confirmed our determination to take action.

See Ian Ground's full report.

Wittgenstein-related Publications

**Online Resources** by Alois Pichler

By the end of 2015, new facsimiles of most of the Nachlass from the Wren Library at Trinity College will be online at the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen, including: *Wittgenstein: Lectures, Cambridge 1930-1933. From the Notes of GE Moore* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2016).

Read more about the archive here ...

**Wittgenstein and Perception**

Campbell, M & O'Sullivan, M Eds (2015) *Wittgenstein and Perception* was published in February 2015 by Routledge. This collection grew out of a conference on the same theme at King's College London in April 2011, which the BWS co-sponsored. We are delighted by the publication of this volume, and congratulate its editors, Michael Campbell and Michael O'Sullivan.

**Portraits of Wittgenstein**

The four volume first edition of *Portraits of Wittgenstein*, published by Thoemmes in 1999 was a splendid anthology of personal memoirs but sadly went out of print. Following a proposal from Bloomsbury Academic Press to the BWS, agreement was reached on producing a second edition.

We hope that BWS members will be pleased to learn that the manuscript of this new edition of Portraits of Wittgenstein has now been completed and is scheduled for publication by Bloomsbury in Autumn 2015.

Featuring a wealth of illuminating and profound insights into Wittgenstein’s extraordinary life, this unique collection reveals Wittgenstein's character and power of personality more vividly and comprehensively than ever before.

Twenty-eight commentaries and reflections together with photographs, maps and chronologies provide historical context to Wittgenstein’s relationships with his intellectual and social circles, his times and his travels.

Co-Editor and BWS Secretary, Ian Ground said: 'It’s been a pleasure to work on the new edition. Flowers and I hope to have improved upon what was already an impressive first edition to produce what we hope is a truly comprehensive collection about Wittgenstein the man. We’ve added to the anthology several difficult to find pieces, - for example an history of Wittgenstein’s time in Newcastle - commissioned some new pieces, from Mary Midgley and Mary Warnock and sought revisions and updates to others, particular John Hayes’ account of Wittgenstein in Ireland. The anthology is some half a million words in total but it will be available in just two volumes.'

With a launch event in Autumn 2015, this revised and updated collection of valuable and otherwise difficult to find material promises to be an indispensable resource for scholars and students of the life and work of Wittgenstein.

More on this link.

BWS welcomes links and flyers to new Wittgenstein-related publications to post here, in the Newsletter, as well as on the Publications or Postings pages of the website.

Wittgenstein in drama

An Evening with Wittgenstein by Carolyn Wilde

Report of the event on 12 March hosted by the Austrian Cultural Forum bringing together Wittgenstein’s great-niece Margaret Stonborough and the philosopher and playwright William Lyons to launch the text of his play Wittgenstein: the Crooked Roads (Bloomsbury Methuen-Drama 2015). Read on ...

Postings

Wittgenstein’s Music

Ray Monk has set up a Spotify playlist of Wittgenstein’s favourite music. It comprises some 220 tracks of mostly German music: Brahms, Schubert, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Wagner with a little Yvette Guilbert thrown in. A listening time of 21 hours. What does the music tell us about the man?

Lecture Series

28 October 2015
14th BWS Lecture
Speaker: Professor Constantine Sandis
Title: Wittgenstein & Friends on Action and the Will

Spring 2016
15th BWS Ludwig Wittgenstein Lecture
Speaker: Dr John Heaton
Title: The Interface between Wittgenstein's Philosophical Therapy and the Empirical Psychotherapies

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.

venue: The Bloomsbury Institute, 50 Bedford Square
London WC1B 3DP, in the Conservatory

Review copies

Available for review

There are always new books are available for review. If you would like one of them sent to you for an in depth critical appreciation, or for a shorter review, please contact Dr Constantinos Athanasopoulos

- Ware, B (2015) Dialectic of the Ladder: Wittgenstein, the 'Tractatus' and Modernism , Bloomsbury eBook
- Kitchen,W (2014) Authority and the Teacher, Bloomsbury eBook

For books published in 2013 and 2012, see the reviews page.

Housekeeping

To unsubscribe or inquire about posting news please email bws@herts.ac.uk. Please inform us of changes in your email address so that we can keep our list up to date.

And don't forget to send in details of your upcoming events so that we can publicise your workshops, seminars, lectures and conferences on our website.

BWS Executive Committee

We are delighted to welcome two new members to the Executive Committee: Constantine Sandis who is our new Treasurer; and Chon Tejedor who is on the Honorary Committee.

Dr Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, President
University of Hertfordshire
Hatfield, Herts

Dr Ian Ground, Secretary
The University of Newcastle
Newcastle upon Tyne

Dr Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Editor
Research Affiliate, Department of Philosophy
Open University

Dr Constantine Sandis, Treasurer, Professor of Philosophy
Oxford Brookes University

The BWS website is designed and maintained by Jane Dorner.