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Reviewed by Craig Fox

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Review: *Wittgenstein and the Creativity of Language*, edited by Sebastian Sunday Grève and Jakub Mácha

Craig Fox

Wittgenstein and the Creativity of Language is surely a valuable addition to the already vast amount of secondary literature on Wittgenstein's philosophy. This itself is an accomplishment. Its value lies not only in the overall quality of the essays in the collection, but also in its very focus. It is perhaps surprising: there are in fact important things still to be said about the relationships between Wittgenstein's philosophy and creativity in language use, in the arts, and in philosophy itself. The essays in this volume all work to counter popular negative perceptions of Wittgenstein's work, and they do it in various ways. Collectively, they provide a nice survey of various types of writing on Wittgenstein.

In addition to filling a gap in Wittgenstein scholarship, the work in this volume also makes a strong case for the relevance of Wittgenstein's thinking to non-philosophical, non-academic settings. Perhaps the worst fate for his work would be for it to be relegated simply to a chapter in the history of 20th-century philosophy. Thus I will organize my discussion of this collection by tracing a theme I find throughout it, though often somewhat beneath the surface—namely, the idea that Wittgenstein can be taken to be preparing us for engaging in criticism. In their introductory essay (Chapter 1), Grève and Mácha (11) quote from Stanley Cavell to highlight that Wittgenstein's investigations were taken by him to represent “new categories of criticism.”¹ In my view this kind of criticism is entirely, and

¹I would also suggest that Cavell's use of “criticism” is compatible, inter-

importantly, “practical”—it addresses how we confront and understand things.²

One last preparatory remark: there is an interesting distinctive difficulty with Wittgenstein's texts, which comes out time and again in various ways in these essays. They require what we might call reflexive interpretation: one learns from his texts what will likely help one to understand them. So they can be difficult to break into, as it were. To understand them is to be attuned to what it is that he's saying and reasons why—but, I'd claim, this kind of (aesthetic) sensitivity is what Wittgenstein is trying to model with the work itself. So we begin, “in the middle of things.”

I admit to being initially puzzled by Mulhall's chapter (Chapter 2), and by its being the first contributed chapter. On the face of it, it's a careful close reading of a paragraph by J. L. Austin, alongside similarly careful close readings of poems. My puzzlement was about the apparent lack of Wittgenstein's presence in much of the essay. In the end, though, the essay itself helps the reader out with its final words: “meaning is use” (51). Wittgenstein gets the last word in a discussion about Austin. What is it then that Wittgenstein gives us here—how, indeed, is this well-known phrase being used in this essay; what does it mean here? The passage from Austin that Mulhall discusses involves “etiolations”: hollow, abnormal, parasitic uses of language (e.g., 35).³

Wittgenstein's “meaning is use” is presented as a riposte to Austin's dismissiveness. If Austin wants somehow to put aside language use “in acting, fiction and poetry” (31), Mulhall marshals Wittgenstein to caution it. For what he's given us are examples of poetic language accompanied by discussions of their

estingly, with Arthur Danto's. This is interesting in part because he actually was a critic, in the professional sense.

²This is also how I would propose to read Wittgenstein's lectures on aesthetics.

³See also Grève and Mácha's discussion (12).

meaningfulness. An important aspect of these discussions is their appeals to extant poetic criticism. He thus effectively enacts a conversation about the significance of these examples. This all amounts to an exploration of how these pieces of language (the poems) were (possibly, or likely) being used. Mulhall is defending a democratic view of language from the standpoint of meaning. Creative language use needn't be sequestered; indeed, what reason is there to? We—perhaps collectively—just might need to spend some time with it, trying to figure it out. This is of course a valuable defense and entirely appropriate at the beginning of this volume.

There is a way in which what Alois Pichler is doing in his chapter (Chapter 3) might be outside of one's expectations for philosophy. He in fact acknowledges this: "one might say that my chapter is not *philosophy*" (73). One might have had a similar worry about Mulhall's discussions of poetry. And of course one might have had such a worry about Wittgenstein's own writing. But then what matters is what one does with one's words.

Pichler structures a discussion about the *Philosophical Investigations* around a framework for analyzing writing styles. He describes the *Investigations* as having a syncretistic or "criss-cross" writing style (58–60). This is one style of writing amongst others that Wittgenstein employed, and Pichler suggests that "the criss-cross form of the PI must be regarded as a result of planning" (62). And Wittgenstein planned the *Investigations*, from 1936 on, in this way because of how he conceived of the type of philosophy he was undertaking at that point: "a philosophy driven by a focus on the particular, on the concrete case and the concrete example" (66). That is, the form of the writing corresponds to the philosophical content. "Syncretistic writing is best for creating knowledge and moving in a terrain that is in continuous flux and is open-ended" (69).

Given all this, when reading the *Investigations* Pichler says we should ask, for example, "Why did he pick *this* specific exam-

ple? . . . Why did he move from this topic to *that* topic?" (72). I would describe this as bringing an aesthetically-critical attitude to the text. Given what we think he's trying to do, why did he do it in just this way? This then leads Pichler to raise questions about Wittgenstein's writing. He wonders about remarks in the early §§100s, and he asks why Wittgenstein chose to include these so-called "meta-philosophical" remarks. They seem to run counter to the criss-cross character of the philosophy and of the writing.

As a brief aside: Moyal-Sharrock also rightly emphasizes the theme of "form and content" in her chapter (Chapter 5). It arises in the context of a discussion of what she calls the "embeddedness of meaning" (132). In an effort to argue against ascribing to Wittgenstein a "linguistic idealism," she appeals to "the inseparable conjunction of form and content" (133). So, for instance, "the formal properties of the novel essentially contribute to its meaning." And then if words are how we get at "content" much of the time, "language is inherently—not inferentially—permeated by the reality of human life"; language is "reality-soaked" (134). This is as far as she's willing to go with what might be a component of an argument for "linguistic idealism"; she wants to maintain "room for a language-independent reality" (126). Wittgenstein links language together with "action and behavior" and thus with "life" (136). And so, "through language, we create much of our reality within, and in alliance with, . . . reality." Linguistic idealism would presumably rule out saying such things.

Returning to Pichler's chapter, I would suggest again that Wittgenstein's philosophy itself induces and encourages the kind of critical attitude I'm highlighting here. For Wittgenstein is of course giving us a concrete example of philosophy, a distinctive kind of particular thing, which we're engaged in trying to understand. (It embodies its lesson.)

In an odd way, we may see Kienzler and Grève (Chapter 4) as giving us a nice illustration of how Wittgenstein is encouraging the critical attitude I'm highlighting here. And their example comes from a surprising place: Wittgenstein's comments on Gödel's (first) Incompleteness Theorem and what Gödel says about it. They characterize Wittgenstein as giving us an account of being engaged in trying to make sense of Gödel's theorem. This amounts to trying to find a useful function for "the Gödelian construct of a string of signs" (76).

They thus regard their approach as a novel way to address what Wittgenstein says on the matter. If successful, it provides a kind of interpretive principle for making one's way through the relevant parts of the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Hence they characterize their task as (i) uncovering Wittgenstein's intentions in RFM, Part I, Appendix III, and (ii) relating this to "the internal structure of the remarks" (77).⁴ So they are trying to show "what he's doing and why he's doing it in the particular way he does," but furthermore, this is also what they're hoping to show Wittgenstein to be doing with Gödel.

The upshot for Kienzler and Grève is to be that, on Wittgenstein's view, Gödel's proof is philosophically motivated—even in its supposed "technical" details—to the degree that the proof and Gödel's commentary are effectively "fundamentally intertwined" (81). Thus they are challenging the no-doubt common notion that commentary on a mathematical proof is vague and the proof itself is precise (82). The problem is the very notion of "unprovable sentence" (88–89), and it's a problem because of the interplay between the mathematics and the language used to present it. Mathematical practice involves assumptions about "proof", as do the words "unprovable sentence." So "ultimately, it remains evidently opaque whatever the mathematical role of

⁴Due to space considerations, I will not, alas, address what is surely the most important part of their paper: the actual careful discussion of Wittgenstein's text.

[the Gödel sentence] might possibly be, or if indeed it was ever supposed to have such a role" (114). In saying Wittgenstein didn't understand the proof of the theorem, Kienzler and Grève suggest, Gödel was in fact correct. But on their view this is the point of Appendix III; Wittgenstein works to understand the proof but cannot, since it lacks meaning. When using language creatively, as perhaps Gödel was, one danger is failing to say what you tried to say.⁵

Garry Hagberg's valuable contribution (Chapter 6) effectively generalizes on what we see enacted in Kienzler and Grève's essay: there, they provide a detailed account of trying to make sense of something. Hagberg's claim is that Wittgenstein tells us no "advance judgment or demarcation [of sense] is possible: it is only case-by-case reasoning and case-by-case interpretation . . . that will allow us to make sense/nonsense distinctions" (146). What he's aiming to do in the chapter is in a sense to prepare us for these kinds of encounters by drawing conclusions from things Wittgenstein says about language.⁶

Hagberg does this primarily by building a case for conducting "inquiries concerning artistic meaning seen in the light of linguistic meaning" (172). He highlights aspects of Wittgenstein's discussions of language that are relevant for the eventual discussion of artistic meaning. So he treats rule-following, language games, naming, and meaning-questions, for instance. But importantly, he then turns to actual examples of works of art. He talks, for instance, about paintings, photographs, etchings, literature, etc., and he discusses them analogously to the

⁵One way to come to know why it is I don't understand something—is the problem with me? or is it with that which I'm trying to understand?—is to work through that thing, to try to make sense of it. This will potentially involve various kinds of specialized knowledge (in mathematics, art, etc.) but it importantly involves attention to the surrounding language. So it will be a matter of taking particular cases as they come.

⁶I see some kind of "preparation" as the main point of Wittgenstein's "Lectures on Aesthetics" (1938), and perhaps of the *Investigations* as well.

discussions of the “Wittgensteinian topics.” And then he also examines what others have said about these works—art historians, for instance. This is presumably appropriate because in any particular case, it may well be helpful in calling aspects of a work’s significance to our attention.⁷ The making-sense-of the work under consideration is always the goal.

As a summary, Hagberg offers a list of Wittgensteinian considerations about language that we should bear in mind when thinking about artistic meaning (172–74). These eighteen points are surely worth attention, as they seem to be clearly of potential use in working through artistic meaning in any particular case. They serve as reminders, essentially, which might prevent us from making certain kinds of mistakes. My only concern is that this focus might induce us or tempt us actually to assimilate art to language, in a way—thereby obscuring potential differences between art and language.⁸

Charles Altieri is perhaps also worried about an aspect of such a comparison (Chapter 7). He tells us that “the arts matter simply because they focus on situations in which there need not be epistemic doubt. The relevant [question becomes] . . . not ‘Is this true?’ but ‘Is this an illuminating presentation of some aspect of our cultural practices?’” (177). The arts gain importance then, because in individual concrete instances, we can learn about our cultural practices.

There is certainly something correct about this attitude. I was indeed initially somewhat puzzled by the claim about the

⁷Hagberg uses work by Kirk Varnedoe, for example, to clarify aspects of a work and essentially to clear the way for employing Wittgensteinian observations about language (in particular, about rule-following (160 ff.)).

⁸For example, and too briefly: 1) some art is more likely to prompt “is it art” questions than language prompts “is it language” questions, 2) some art is perhaps more likely to prompt meaning questions than instances of language use are, 3) historical progression in art seems to be more frequently relevant to its understanding, and 4) as such we tend to be more explicitly aware of the history of art than the history of language (or aware of its relevance). Differences suggest art and language (can) play different roles for us.

arts and “epistemic doubt”—however, surely the possibility of epistemic doubt is not a *necessary* feature of our experiences with the arts. We can accept a work as presented to us and seek to understand what it illuminates. This can be done well, or poorly, for sure, but whether what is illuminated in the work is illuminating (*for me*, we might say) is at least partly a function of my interests, plans, projects, etc.

And what is illuminated is something “outside” of me. Altieri seems tempted to say something like, “the world is what’s illuminated.” He thus concludes by discussing “realism”: “[r]ealism is best seen as a mode for displaying collective feeling for a shareable world rather than a rhetoric that sets limits on literary representation. Realism can offer self-reflexive explorations of what is involved in leading a recognizable life in society, sharing its pleasures and pains . . .” (196). What we get from the arts then are examples to which we ideally become “attuned” (188–89)—ideally via which we transitively become attuned to others (the world). Criticism—explorations of the significance of things, which might help us in this task of “attunement”—can help us with our relation to others and the world.

John Hyman’s chapter (Chapter 8) explores Wittgenstein’s various relations to the architect Adolf Loos and his thought. He gives a fine illustration of how aesthetic criticism and cultural criticism are intertwined, and also of how architecture and criticism can serve the function of illumination. Interestingly, he also addresses the simultaneous possibility of a (broad kind of aesthetic/cultural) criticism’s ability to “renew the arts” (204).

There is a great deal of value in Maria Balaska’s chapter on limits and creativity (Chapter 9). We could see her as focusing on a theme in Hagberg’s essay: that of “novel approaches to following a rule” (159–60).⁹ She organizes this discussion around the notion of “an experience of limitation” (219). In particular, she’s concerned with what happens when words seem to let

⁹This is importantly related to what Cavell calls “modernism.”

us down somehow—we become “disappointed with meaning” (220). She provides a number of compelling examples of such experiences, in order to explore what can be a consequence of them: the apparent problem of “groundlessness of meaning.”

Disappointment can come when we try to express the value of an experience that we feel as “absolute.” Our words seem to fall short of expressing such value. The words I use can seem to be deprived of exactly of what I’m trying to express. (One might respond that this worry is simply a psychological one.) Balaska is concerned to emphasize, rightly I think, that this experience of disappointment is an “everyday” experience (see e.g., 200–01 and 229–30). We might think of athletes being interviewed after a winning performance, saying things such as that “words cannot express their emotions . . .”

The words used in these failed efforts then, according to Balaska (essentially relying on a particular way of reading the *Tractatus*), are nonsense. So when one generates nonsense, an understandable reaction is to be troubled by what one has inadvertently done. Balaska suggests two reasonable responses to this. The first is to *give in to* the words, we might say, giving up on the supposed “absolute value.” The second is to *give up on* the words, we might say, and to postulate a realm of the ineffable.

Balaska’s solution is a middle path. We should remain exposed to the nonsense and see it as “an opportunity for creativity” (225). She calls this a “stance of reflection,” which requires a sensitivity to possibilities for meaning (232), and this is why creativity comes to the fore here. To operate creatively in this middle space requires our “active engagement with the world and the community” (234).¹⁰

In Ben Ware’s chapter treating aspect-perception and what he calls “modernist ethics” (Chapter 10), he asserts that the *Philosophical Investigations* should itself be seen as a “creative achieve-

ment” (254). Part of this creativity would lie in its conception of philosophy: that its purpose is to get us “to see things differently” (241) or to “look at . . . thing[s] in a different way” (244). And we’re led to do this not necessarily through reason and proof, say, but rather through “persuasion” (254). Of course, one worries here that philosophy might collapse into rhetoric.

If Ware is right about all this, then it helps explain why Wittgenstein compares his way of doing his philosophical work, and its corresponding self-imposed aims, to artistic achievements. Ware quotes PI §401, where Wittgenstein talks of “a new way of painting . . . a new meter, or a new kind of song.” Painting, or poetry, or music can sometimes lead us to see things differently. And of course this is one possible conception of what “modernism” is or was: the attempt to create things “better”—thereby also exploring the limits of one’s medium. Ware emphasizes the point that this seemingly aesthetic point can have a political cast as well. For politics, too, it might be fruitful to see “anew what is always in front of our eyes” (260). Political imagination might then be reignited and new creative, practical possibilities considered.

This would seem to be how to conceive of the project of Rupert Read’s contribution (Chapter 11). Read spends time first arguing against a view of infinity and language that he finds in Chomsky’s work. There are consequences of this discussion for the notion of creativity. Touching upon a theme of several chapters, Read uses the phrase “real creativity.” So “the judgment that something is a tune/is a sentence depends upon its being, ultimately, recognizable as the tune/sentence that it is. Alleged tunes or sentences that lack such perspicuity/recognizability need not be allowed to be tunes or sentences at all” (276). This is all a way of saying that there are constraints on what counts as creativity. It’s not the case, in music or in language, that “anything goes.” But as Read highlights, what will be permissible is partly up to us (individually and collectively).

¹⁰Isn’t there a question, though about these two extremes—are they even meaningful options?

The chapter fits nicely after both Balaska's and Ware's. For Read's discussion of creativity is perhaps a different route to where Balaska ended up, with her "stance of reflection." And then we might see much of what Read goes on to do as coming from that stance, but also, equally, as engaged in what I called the "creative politics" for which Ware seems to hope. Read calls attention to the ways in which political language itself frames political arguments and decision-making from the very beginning, thus highlighting different possibilities for how we discuss politics. Political effectiveness would seem to benefit from our attentiveness to creative possibilities. What will work is up to us to figure out.

Craig Fox
California University of Pennsylvania
fox@calu.edu