

Vinten's Sociological Wittgenstein

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Robert Vinten's *Wittgenstein and the Social Sciences* (2020) is one of a small handful of books that have tried to take seriously the idea that Wittgenstein's philosophy is relevant to the task of understanding the social world, and perhaps relevant to the social sciences. Peter Winch (1963) and Hanna Pitkin (1972) offered views on this topic decades ago, but Vinten's approach is distinctive and substantial, and he discusses a literature that did not exist at the time of Winch's or Pitkin's writing. The book has three main thrusts. Part I is devoted to philosophical issues that arise concerning the social sciences. Part II is on the topic of "political philosophy", or what Vinten calls somewhat misleadingly "ideology". He asks whether there is a distinctive ideology that is expressed or implied in Wittgenstein's work—whether conservative, liberal, or progressive or socialist. Part III addresses two substantive topics in the human sciences to assess the relevance and value of a Wittgensteinian perspective on the social world (freedom of the will and the problem of justice).

Vinten is emphatic, clear, and unwavering about his view of Wittgenstein's understanding of philosophy. Philosophy has only one mission, and this is the task of conceptual clarification. It is not derivative from the empirical sciences, and it does not depend upon the methods of the empirical sciences. It is relevant to the sciences, however, because scientists often suffer from conceptual confusions. Philosophy can help let the fly out of the fly bottle (Wittgenstein 1967, paragraph 309)—it can help to resolve those conceptual confusions.

I will be equally explicit here: I do not believe that this is a good way of understanding the task of philosophy. Further, if one persists in this approach, then it is all but guaranteed that the results of philosophical inquiry will be entirely irrelevant to the challenges of social-science investigation of the social world.

Let us begin by examining more closely Wittgenstein's distinction between philosophy and science. Vinten attributes to Wittgenstein a strong view of the relationship that exists between philosophy and science, and he endorses that view himself. Vinten writes:

Wittgenstein was clear throughout his career that philosophy was a different sort of activity to disciplines which seek knowledge of the world around us (Vinten 2021, p. 16).

The view is that philosophy is concerned only with conceptual matters and has no involvement in the empirical or experimental investigation of the world—no relation to science. (Vinten sometimes refers to this dichotomy as the dis-

inction between “cognitive disciplines” and “conceptual disciplines”; p. 4.) Philosophers have the job of clarifying concepts; scientists have the job of observing the empirical world and developing theories to explain its workings.

In order to produce good work in social science we must achieve some clarity about the concepts we are using. To say something true about social phenomena we must make sense. The kinds of confusions that Wittgenstein was so skilled in identifying in his philosophical work are confusions that are still rife among social scientists (p. 3).

This position suggests adherence to the distinction preferred in ethical theory in the 1940s and 1950s between metaethical philosophy and substantive ethics. The former is the appropriate terrain for the philosopher, whereas the latter is for the social reformer or the politician. This is unfortunate, however, because it means that all the content of a philosophical treatment of the social sciences is necessarily entirely distinct from the reasoning and assumptions of the social scientists themselves. Another view, more credible in my view, is that the philosophy of social science should be understood as simply the most abstract end of a continuum of reasoning within the social sciences about theory, ontology, methodology, and the like. On this view, philosophy is not an independent and apriori source of insight into the social world; it is rather itself informed by the ways that we have developed to understand the workings of the social world within theory formation and conceptual development within the sciences (Little 2021).

The stance that philosophers serve to “clear away confusions” that other disciplines are prone to fall into is unfortunate for another reason: it makes communication between philosophy and sociology or political science much more difficult. It makes the intellectual exercise a contest between “confused” empirical researchers and “clear-sighted” philosophers who can set matters right. But this is not a good basis for communication or collaborative progress on substantive intellectual issues.

A second concern arises from the fact that Vinten conjoins social philosophy and philosophy of social science. These may sound like cognate areas of thought that can be treated together. In fact, Vinten subsumes the philosophy of social science under “social philosophy”:

What I will do in this book is take a look at some of the issues in social philosophy that I take to be central—(i) issues about the nature of social sciences, whether they can be properly called scientific; (ii) the issue of reductionism, whether social sciences can be explained in terms of the (perhaps more fundamental) natural sciences; (iii) the issue of the proper form of explanation in the social sciences (if indeed there is a proper form of explanation in the social sciences); (iv) the issue of relativism, whether social scientists should contemplate some form of relativism about truth, justification, knowledge, existence, or concepts; (v) the issue of ideology—whether Wittgensteinian philosophy favours a particular ideological standpoint; (vi) the issues of freedom of the will and responsibility; and, finally, (vii) the issue of justice (p. 2).

But this conflation is misleading. Social philosophy is a branch of normative philosophy, concerning itself with topics like freedom, rights, authority, justice, and sovereignty. The philosophy of social science has a completely different domain. It is concerned with ontology, epistemology, methodology, and explanation. Each of these topics requires discussion in full dialogue with working social scientists. There are normative questions that arise here, but they are norms of rationality rather than norms of justice.

It might be suggested that there is a dichotomy contained in “social talk” to be explored here, but not the one that Vinten sketches. Instead, we might ask about whether Wittgenstein’s philosophical ideas are relevant to the *philosophy of society* as well as the philosophy of social science. The former set of questions have to do with how we should conceptualize the social world around us. What are some important metaphysical or ontological features of social life that might be uncovered through careful philosophical investigation of our experience of social life? The second family of questions concerns how we should investi-

gate and explicate the social world, based on methods of observation, hypothesis, and conceptualization of social phenomena. This dichotomy corresponds to a distinction that can be found in Aristotle between the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of our knowledge of nature. It seems clear that Wittgenstein presupposes a view of human social relationships in the *Philosophical Investigations*—for example, that these relationships are mediated by language, and language possesses inherent imprecision and variation. Wittgenstein’s focus on rules and rule-following constitutes another line of thought that is relevant to the question, how does society work? So it is credible that Wittgenstein has something to contribute to the “philosophy of society”. Vinten does not pursue this question, but I will return to it below.

In his chapters on topics relevant to the philosophy of empirical social science, Vinten considers several issues that have been of concern in this field. One of those topics is whether a social science is possible at all. Vinten follows Peter Winch (1963) in suggesting that the idea of a “scientific” understanding of social life is unappetizing to Wittgenstein:

In his book *The Idea of a Social Science* Peter Winch developed Wittgenstein’s ideas about action, behaviour, language, and rules into a critique of the idea that the disciplines known as the social sciences are scientific in the manner of the natural sciences (p. 26).

In a single compact paragraph Vinten casts doubt on the idea that Wittgenstein could support the idea of a “scientific” treatment of the social world at all (p. 27). He argues that there are at least three ways in which a framework for understanding the social world might be called “scientific”. It might demonstrate that features of the social world can be reduced to facts about the natural world—social psychology or neurophysiology, for example. It might reject reductionism but maintain that the explanations offered in the social framework are fundamentally the same in structure as those in the natural sciences. And it might be held that the methodologies of research and assessment are the same in the social and natural sciences. (He also considers the question of whether there is progress in the state of knowledge in the social sciences.) Vinten argues that Wittgenstein would reject each of these claims of parallel between social studies and natural science. Wittgenstein was explicit in rejecting the idea of reducing one set of facts to another set of facts. Second, Vinten believes that natural-science explanations require causal hypotheses, whereas Wittgenstein’s understanding of human action involves subjective reasons rather than objective causes. Third, Vinten believes that Wittgenstein would reject the methodological-unity criterion because he identifies natural-science methodology with Vienna Circle doctrines (positivism, verificationism, unity of science).

This line of thought amounts to a theme of anti-positivism and anti-naturalism that is very appropriate to the social sciences (Little 1993). However, it begs a crucial question: is there an evidence-based approach to the study of the social and historical world that does *not* pursue a positivist, naturalistic, and generalizing model of science? A survey of social science over the past half-century makes it apparent that the answer is yes. In the field of comparative historical sociology, for example, several generations of sociologists have investigated the causes and contingencies of revolution, economic change, and knowledge systems without engaging in positivistic or naturalistic models of scientific knowledge and explanation. The view that the social sciences should seek out concrete social-causal mechanisms has contributed greatly to a non-positivistic social science that is fully engaged in empirical and evidence-based investigation of social life. (See Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005 for a rich collection of essays on post-positivist sociology.)

A second major topic that Vinten explores in Wittgenstein’s thought is the view that “action” is the key idea that distinguishes the social world from the natural world. Human beings act on the basis of motives and reasons, which distinguishes them fundamentally from molecules and planetary systems. This leads Vinten to follow Winch and like-minded interpreters of Wittgenstein to suggest the familiar distinction between explanation and understanding, causation and interpretation (von Wright 1971). By implication, then, Wittgenstein’s version of “social studies” would involve critical hermeneutics rather than generalizations and causation. There is a long history of thinking about social and historical inquiry that is raised

by these observations: nomothetic versus ideographic or historicist approaches to the social world, causal versus interpretive approaches, and objective observation versus *verstehen* approaches. Essentially Vinten takes sides around these dichotomies on Wittgenstein's behalf: social "science" cannot be nomothetic, it cannot be causal, and it cannot be objective. However, it is invalid to infer from the fact that "actors make the social world" to the conclusion that "causation is not relevant to the social world". In fact, the focus on social-causal mechanisms in the philosophy of social science in the past two decades usually embraces the idea that the "substrate" of social causation is "social actors within concrete institutional arrangements". But this view of the social world is entirely compatible with the contention that social causes are at work in events such as financial crashes, outbreaks of civil strife, or the pace of economic development in different cultures. Hedstrom and Ylikoski (2010) provide an excellent survey of current thinking about concrete social-causal mechanisms in terms that are entirely compatible with an actor-centered view of the social world.

In fact, it is entirely possible to formulate a view of the social sciences that rejects positivism, crude reductionism, the insistence on generalizations, the idea that the social sciences should resemble the natural sciences, and the idea that scientific knowledge depends on pure observation for its empirical content. It is possible to acknowledge the unmistakable fact that human beings are cultural, meaningful, and intentional actors, and that social events depend on the actions that actors undertake. And it is possible to argue for a coherent view of "social causation" that is consistent with the basic facts about socially constituted, socially situated actors (Little 2014). Such a framework for thinking about scientific studies of the social world does not depend upon assumptions about reducibility from the social level to the psychological or biological levels. And it does not adopt a positivist or neo-positivist view of the nature of theory confirmation, based on a range of pure observations, deductions from hypotheses, and testing of hypotheses. In place of that positivist model of confirmation, an alternative basis for the philosophy of social science can rest confidently on a conception of piecemeal empirical investigation and inference in the context of a contingent, actor-centered social world.

An example: sociologists' use of "structure"

It might be useful to consider a concrete example that would be of interest both to Wittgenstein and to sociologists. Are there high-level concepts that are frequently used in sociological theory but that reveal an important degree of conceptual unclarity or confusion? Are there concepts where a Wittgensteinian analysis along the lines described by Vinten would be substantively helpful to future developments in the discipline? There are, and an especially important example is the idea of a "social structure".

The term "social structure" is used in a very loose and flexible way across many strands of theory in sociology. Examples of social structures that have appeared in sociological theory include:

- The Protestant ethic
- The capitalist mode of production
- The Chinese peasantry in the Qing period
- The world trading system
- The Jim Crow system
- The Chicago police department
- American racial segregation in housing
- White supremacist ideology
- The University of Wisconsin

We could extend the list. Here is the important point to observe: each of these "social entities", these social structures, works differently; each has a different scope of application; each appears to have a different relationship to individuals in society; and so forth, for a large number of distinctions. The idea of a social

structure seems to have much of the conceptual openness that Wittgenstein found in the idea of a game in *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein's observation about "tools" seems appropriate to "structure" as well:

Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. —The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects (PI 11).

This semantic and pragmatic diversity across uses of "tool" is not harmful—until our use of the term leads us to imagine that there is an underlying essence of "tools" that all tools share. This is the error of reification: the inference from the use of a term to the idea that there is some existing thing to which it always refers.

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably (PI 115).

In the examples of social structures mentioned here, each theorist would be able to provide a further explication of what he or she intends to refer to; but by using the term "social structure" to refer to all these diverse social arrangements, we are at risk to the possibility that we will imagine that the social world consists of "actors" and "structures".

It is crucial to be reasonably specific in our use of general terms like structure, relationship, power, or class. The theorist should be prepared to paraphrase his or her intended meaning in using the concept. More radically, a Wittgensteinian sociologist might propose, perhaps, that we ought to forego the language of social structure except in circumstances where we can specify with some exactness what we mean by the use.

So in this instance, it would be helpful to engage in a Wittgensteinian act of conceptual clarification with various social theorists, in order to distinguish the features and assumptions each is attributing to the system he or she refers to. Further, without that clarification, when Marx and Merton refer to structures, their readers may incorrectly assume that they refer to the same kind of social entity.

Several ideas appear to be core features in our ordinary understanding of the concept of a social structure. A social structure consists of rules, institutions, and practices. A social structure is socially embodied in the actions, thoughts, beliefs, and durable dispositions of individual human beings. A social structure is effective in organizing behavior of large numbers of actors. A structure is coercive of individual and group behavior. A social structure assigns roles and powers to individual actors. A social structure often has distributive consequences for individuals and groups. A social structure is geographically dispersed. Social structures can cause social outcomes involving both persistence and change.

We might try to reduce these intuitions to a definition: a social structure is a system of geographically dispersed rules and practices that influence the actions and outcomes of large numbers of social actors.

Now let us turn to an important question: do such things exist in a Wittgensteinian social world? Wittgenstein accepts the existence of social practices without question. Rules, games, institutions, conventions, and persistent arrangements among individuals are all taken at face value by Wittgenstein. But is there any suggestion on Wittgenstein's part that these social features "depend" upon some set of facts about individuals? Is there a basis for postulating that Wittgenstein could be persuaded to defend an "actor-centered" social ontology, where social practices depend on facts about individuals and their mental states? Vinten's reprise of Wittgenstein's anti-reductionism suggests that the answer is negative. Wittgenstein is not interested in the sociologist's statement: "The social practice of communal barn-building depends on the acceptance by a large number of individuals of the norms of mutual aid." Moreover, he is disinterested in this claim, not because he would believe it to be false, but because he is fundamentally uninterested in

the question that it is intended to answer: “Why does the social practice of communal barn-building persist in some communities and not others?”

Compare that view with the view taken by most philosophers of social science today: social entities, processes, forces, and structures depend entirely on the behaviors and mental frameworks of the individuals who compose them (Little 2016). This view is described as ontological individualism. Any social entity must possess microfoundations in human mentalities and actions. There is no such thing as a social entity that lacks human embodiment—any more than there are works of art that lacks material embodiment.

Several of the instances offered above as examples of social structures fit the terms of our provisional definition. They are large complexes of rules and practices that influence behavior and outcomes. And it is straightforward to begin to provide a description of the microfoundations upon which they exist: the social components through which these structures are embodied and through which they exercise influence on individuals and groups.

Several of the examples mentioned above appear to fall outside the category of social structure, however; for example, “Chinese peasantry”. These examples appear to be large factors that play a role in large social structures, but are not themselves “structures”. They are more akin to elements than systems. So the structure that defines “Chinese peasantry” is the system of property, agriculture, and kinship that defines the peasant’s role and opportunities in society; the category of “peasant” identifies one node within that system or structure.

This example suggests that conceptual analysis is indeed useful for sociology and other social sciences. We gain clarity by formulating our concepts more precisely. However, this should not be thought of as a purely philosophical process, distinct in principle from the ordinary work of social-science theorizing. Instead, it is an instance of a more disciplined approach to theory formulation than sometimes the great sociological theorists have pursued.

WITTGENSTEIN AND THE SOCIAL WORLD

Let us now return to the idea mentioned above that Wittgenstein makes a contribution to the philosophy of the social sciences through his implicit “philosophy of society”. A Wittgensteinian theory of society might potentially serve as a valuable contribution to the topic of social ontology. It is important to emphasize that such a contribution would not be different in kind from the *theorizing* done by a Merton, Marx, or Durkheim. It is not pure philosophy, but rather an abstraction from Wittgenstein’s observations of the workings of various social practices. It is a version of abstract “folk” sociology. On this view, there is a potentially valuable way of reading Wittgenstein’s relevance to the social sciences: as a contribution to sociological theory, with valuable substantive concepts such as “family resemblance”, forms of life, the language game metaphor, and so forth for a number of insightful metaphors and ideas about the social world.

Along these lines we might emphasize Wittgenstein’s understanding of language as a deeply social product; his criticism of naive ideas about “meaning” in language; his idea of language games; his critical discussions of “following a rule”; his thoughts about the interpretation of behavior; his idea of a set of social practices setting a context for action and meaning; his notion that learning a language is learning a way of life; and other suggestive ideas as well. All these threads have some suggestive implications for how to think about social behavior and the social world.

Hanna Pitkin explores Wittgenstein’s metaphors and insights into the social world in *Wittgenstein and Justice* (1972). Pitkin’s central goal is to contribute to the foundations of political theory by thinking carefully about Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language and behavior. Along the way she provides a sketch of a Wittgensteinian social ontology. Here is how she begins:

It is by no means obvious that someone interested in politics and society needs to concern himself with philosophy; nor that, in particular, he has anything to learn from an obscure, misanthropic, enigmatic philosopher like Ludwig Wittgenstein, who never wrote about such topics at all.

Wittgenstein's interests were philosophy itself, language, and the relationship between the two. Yet his investigations can yield insights of the most fundamental significance for social science or political theory.... What he has to offer is something like a new perspective, a new way of seeing what has always been visible, what has gone unnoticed precisely because of its familiarity (p. 1)

Perhaps most immediate contribution to social ontology in the *Philosophical Investigations* is Wittgenstein's emphasis on social practices and his umbrella concept of "forms of life" as a totality of practices, regularities, bodily circumstances, and rules within which we behave. Pitkin describes the concept of "forms of life" this way:

That notion is never explicitly defined, and we should not try to force more precision from it than its rich suggestiveness will bear. but its general significance is clear enough: human life as we live and observe it is not just a random, continuous flow, but displays recurrent patterns, regularities, characteristic ways of doing and being, of feeling and acting, of speaking and interacting. Because they are patterns, regularities, configurations, Wittgenstein calls them forms; and because they are patterns in the fabric of human existence and activity on earth, he calls them forms of life. The idea is clearly related to the idea of a language game, and more generally to Wittgenstein's action-oriented view of language. "The speaking of language," he says, "is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (p. 132).

This is an important idea. It provides a different way of locating individuals and their subjectivity within a broader social, inter-subjective context. Neither individual nor collectivity is privileged; instead, we have a conception of a mutual "society-making" through the intentional and oriented actions and thoughts of multiple social beings. We can also ask whether Wittgenstein imagines one form of life or many, corresponding to the circumstances of different historical and cultural settings. Answering this question goes a way towards deciding whether we need a single social science or multiple inquiries, attuned to unique cultural settings in different societies.

Another line of thought is also helpful: Wittgenstein's deep critique of the search for philosophically simple theories (of language, meanings, or concepts). In place of logically simple analysis, Wittgenstein suggests that we conceive of social life as an overlapping set of practices without a single underlying essence. This is the most obvious contrast between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*; the former tries to give a single, logically austere definition of language and meaning; whereas the latter understands language more along the lines of an old, medieval city, with criss-crossing layers and paths—a messy, complex, and somewhat contradictory reality.

So there probably *are* new insights to be gained from Wittgenstein about society. It is worthwhile undertaking a careful re-reading of the *Investigations* asking a new question: what is the framework of thought in terms of which Wittgenstein thinks about social relations, social interpretation, and social action? How can some of these ideas give us some new insights into the task of framing an adequate social science? And how would some central tenets of current philosophy of social science look when treated from the point of view of the *Investigations*?

WHO MADE WITTGENSTEIN?

I will close by turning Vinten's question on its head and asking a sociological question about Wittgenstein himself: who made Wittgenstein a great philosopher? Why is the eccentric Austrian now regarded as one of the twentieth century's greatest philosophers? What conjunction of events in his life history and the world of philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century led to this accumulating recognition and respect?

This is a question that finds natural application in the “new sociology of knowledge,” championed by sociologists such as Charles Camic, Neil Gross, and Michelle Lamont (2011).

There is an old-fashioned approach to intellectual history that presumes something like this: talent inevitably rises to prominence in intellectual life. The young man Wittgenstein was indeed exceptionally talented and original, and the meritocratic approach to intellectual history posits that talent eventually rises to the attention of the elite in a discipline or field of knowledge. But this is implausible in even more ordinary circumstances. Further, the circumstances in which Wittgenstein achieved eminence were anything but ordinary. His formal training was in engineering, not philosophy; his national origin was Austria, not Britain; his early years were marked by the chaos of the Great War; his personality was prickly and difficult; and his writings were as easily characterized as “peculiar” as “brilliant”. (Ray Monk’s 1990 biography of Wittgenstein sheds a great deal of light on his philosophical itinerary.)

The idea of a *field* introduced by Bourdieu in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) is particularly helpful in addressing this topic. The heart of Bourdieu’s approach is “*relationality*”—the idea that cultural production and its products are situated and constituted in terms of a number of processes and social realities. Cultural products and producers are located within “a space of positions and position-takings” (Bourdieu 1993, p. 30) that constitute a set of objective relations:

The space of literary or artistic position-takings, i.e. the structured set of the manifestations of the social agents involved in’ the field—literary or artistic works, of course, but also political acts or pronouncements, manifestos or polemics, etc.—is inseparable from the space of literary or artistic positions defined by possession of a determinate quantity of specific capital (recognition) and, at the same time, by occupation of a determinate position in the structure of the distribution of this specific capital. The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces.

This description highlights another characteristic feature of Bourdieu’s approach to social life—an intimate intermixture of objective and subjective factors, or of structure and agency. Bourdieu typically wants to help us understand a sociological whole as a set of “doings” within “structures and powers.” This is captured in the final sentence of the passage: a “field of forces” but also a “field of struggles”. The field of the French novel in the 1890s established a set of objective circumstances to which the novelist was forced to adapt; but it also created opportunities for strategy and struggle for aspiring novelists. Emile Zola is an interesting example of a novelist who both existed within the field and extended its scope.

Fundamental to Bourdieu’s view is that we cannot understand the work of art or literature (or philosophy or science, by implication) purely in reference to itself. Rather, it is necessary to situate the work in terms of other points of reference in meaning and practice. So he writes that we can’t understand the history of philosophy as a grand summit conference among the great philosophers (Bourdieu 1993, p. 32). Instead, it is necessary to situate Descartes or Russell within his specific intellectual and practical context, and likewise Martin Knutzen and Alice Ambrose Lazerowitz—both talented philosophers who did not become household names in the profession.

These comments give us a better idea of what a “field” encompasses. It is a zone of social activity in which there are “creators” who are intent on creating a certain kind of cultural product. The product is defined, in part, by the expectations and values of the audience—not simply the creator. The audience is multiple, from specialist connoisseurs to the mass public. And the product is supported and filtered by a range of overlapping social institutions—galleries, academies, journals, reviews, newspapers, universities, patrons, sources of funding, and the market for works of “culture.” It is also important to observe that we could have begun this inventory of components at any point; the creator does not define the field any more than the critic, the audience, or the marketplace. This conception provides a valuable scheme in terms of which to try to situate Wittgenstein, and to account for his ascendancy within the discipline.

The field of a sub-discipline of philosophy at a given time, then, is an assemblage of institutions, persons, universities, journals, social networks, and funding agencies. The question of whether an aspiring young philosopher rises or languishes is a social and institutional one, depending on the nature of his or her graduate program, the eminence of the mentors, the reception of early publications and conference presentations, and the like. Indicators and causes of rising status depend on answers to questions like these: Are the publications included in the elite journals? Are the right people praising the work? Is the candidate pursuing the right kinds of topics given the tastes of the current generation of talent-spotters in the profession? This approach postulates that status in a given profession depends crucially on situational and institutional facts—not simply “talent” and “brilliance”. And in many instances, the reality of these parameters reflexively influence the thinker himself: the young philosopher adapts, consciously or unconsciously, to the signposts of status.

Neil Gross’s (2008) biography of Richard Rorty provides an excellent example of careful analysis of a philosopher’s career in these terms. Gross provides a convincing account of how the influence of the field’s definition of the “important” problems affected Rorty’s development, and how the particular circumstances of the Princeton department influenced his later development in an anti-analytic direction. Camic, Gross, and Lamont provide similar examples in *Social Knowledge in the Making* (2011).

By locating various individuals within the network of institutions, journals, scholars, and funding sources it is possible to attempt to piece together the ways in which their own research agendas unfolded (responding to incentives created by their field) and the influence they exerted on other scholars. What all of this seems to support is the idea that the academic disciplines are in fact highly contingent in their development, and that there is no reason to expect convergence around a single “best” version of the discipline. This implies that a discipline like sociology or philosophy could have developed very differently, with substantially different ideas about research questions and methods. Wittgenstein’s rise as an influential voice and expert was not inevitable.

What, then, was the “field” into which Wittgenstein injected himself in his visits to Frege and Russell in 1911 and following years? Here is a point that seems clear from the perspective of the present: the “field” of analytic philosophy in 1905 was substantially less determinate than it was from 1950 to 1980. This fact has two contradictory implications: first, that this indeterminacy made it more possible for an “oddball” philosopher to make it to the top; and second, that it made it more unlikely that talent would be consistently identified and rewarded. The relative looseness of the constraints on the field permitted “sports” to emerge, and also made it possible that highly meritorious thinkers would be overlooked. (So a brilliant young philosopher studying logic and language at the Tbilisi State University in 1925 might never have gotten a chance to move into the top reaches of the discipline.)

What were some of the situational facts that contributed to Wittgenstein’s meteoric rise? One element seems clear: Wittgenstein’s early association with Bertrand Russell beginning in 1911, and the high-level entrée this provided Wittgenstein into the elite circles of philosophy at Cambridge, was a crucial step in his rise to stardom. And Wittgenstein’s status with Russell was itself a curious conjunction: Wittgenstein’s fascination with Frege, aspects of the *Tractatus* that appealed to Russell, and Wittgenstein’s personal intellectual style. But because of this association, Wittgenstein was not starting his rise to celebrity in the provinces, but rather at the center of the emerging field of British analytic philosophy.

Another element is one that was highly valued in Cambridge culture—the individual’s conversational skills. Simply being introduced into a circle of eminent thinkers does not assure eminence. Instead, it is necessary to perform conversationally in ways that induce interest and respect. Wittgenstein was apparently charismatic in an intense, harsh way. He was passionate about ideas and he expressed himself in ways that gave an impression of brilliant originality. He made a powerful impression on the leading philosophers of his environment.

And then there are his writings—or rather, his peculiar manuscript, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1961). One could easily have dismissed the manuscript as a mad expression of logicism run wild, with its numbered paragraphs, its dense prose, and its gnomic expressions. Or one could react, as Russell did, with

understanding and fascination. But without the reputation created by Russell's reception of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein would never have gotten the chance to expose the equally perplexing and challenging thinking that was expressed in *Philosophical Investigations*. In fact, almost all of Wittgenstein's later written work is epigrammatic and suggestive rather than argumentative and constructive. When there is insight, it comes as a bolt from the blue rather than as a developed line of thought. And significantly, much of it was published posthumously.

So let us test out this idea: a verbally brilliant man, a charismatic interlocutor, a person with original perspectives on philosophical topics and methods—but also a figure who benefited greatly from some excellent marketing, some influential patrons, and some situationally unusual lucky breaks. Had Russell been less patient, had publishers found the *Tractatus* too strange for their liking, had Moore been less open-minded about Wittgenstein's PhD defense—then analytical philosophy might no longer remember the name “Wittgenstein”. This interpretation of Wittgenstein's stature suggests something more general as well: there is an enormous degree of arbitrariness and contingency in the history of ideas and in the processes through which some thinkers emerge as “canonical”. Wittgenstein's career seems to bear out that impression.

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