

Wittgenstein, The Radical?

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Vinten entitles section 0.3 of his book “Wittgenstein, The Radical.” As his remarks there make explicit, Vinten worries less about whether or not Wittgenstein the person had a particular philosophical outlook (though he comments on evidence one way or the other regarding this question). Rather, he claims to establish that a style of philosophizing that he imputes to Wittgenstein’s later work can be used to transform some key debates in social and political philosophy:

I will argue in this book that Wittgenstein’s radical philosophy could also be useful in developing the radical politics and social theory that we need around the world now... We face enormous threats from climate change, rising authoritarianism, bigotry, and war. [1] Wittgenstein’s philosophy is useful in challenging the dominant liberalism of today, which does not seem to be up to the task of rising to those challenges, and in developing a clearer, more radical alternative to it. [2] It can help us to get clearer about the nature of disagreements, about what justice requires, and about the justifications given for various forms of society. Wittgenstein himself may not have been a radical in his politics but [3] his philosophy can help radicals to get clearer in their political thought (p. 22, numbering added).

1-3 above articulate the chief claims that Vinten’s book undertakes to explicate and defend. The primary goal will thus presumably be to marshal the sort of critical insights one finds in Wittgenstein’s thought as he recoils from his earlier views so as to show how these can be fruitfully applied to mounting a specifically *radical* critique social and political philosophy.

Since the post-*Tractatus* Wittgenstein goes to heroic stylistic lengths to avoid offering anything that looks like a systematic philosophy, Vinten sets himself no small exegetical task. How does Vinten take himself to have made good on this promise? One of many unsettling features of this book concerns how discussions of what Wittgenstein’s position on this or that topic might be veers in every case into a discussion of how this or that monograph on Wittgenstein’s thought takes it to be. Nowhere in Vinten’s work does one find a detailed consideration of Wittgenstein’s own work in a sustained effort to stitch together exactly what position might most plausibly be extracted from Wittgenstein’s scattered notes on various topics. Too often, alas, one finds only

a single passage quoted, as if crystalline in its intent and so its implications, and so as underwriting a particular view an author imputes to Wittgenstein.

Vinten adds to the problem of comprehending his rationale for positions by all too often offering “argument” formulations that make one gasp. Consider the following:

It is fair to say that calling social disciplines ‘sciences’ is the way that we ordinarily talk about them. A divergence from ordinary use requires more than just showing that social disciplines differ from natural sciences in significant ways, since this is recognized by many of those who quite happily talk about social sciences. So, I conclude that social sciences deserve to be called sciences because they are empirical, knowledge-producing disciplines which, done properly, involve analytical rigour and responsiveness to evidence (p. 47; see also p. 46).

One might just chuckle if an undergraduate suggested as a reason for accepting a discipline as a science the fact that that “is the way that we ordinarily talk about them.” As the conclusion of the above cited argument—what follows the ‘So’ in the last sentence of the quote—makes explicit, Vinten assumes what he needs to prove. For what Vinten appears to offer as an actual reason for taking the social sciences to be genuine sciences assumes the very point at issue: that they are empirical, knowledge-producing disciplines that involve analytical rigor and responsiveness to evidence. Vinten does provide no evidence or argument in favor of *that*. Indeed, one would expect that in order to make any philosophical sense of Vinten’s assertions here a discussion of what makes for a science follows. None does.

Unfortunately, the previous citation typifies what the book retails as arguments. Adding to the puzzle of what Vinten’s procedure could even possibly prove is the fact that Vinten himself insists on this very point, i.e., that the usual indices of a science such as successful law-like explanations turn out to be absent from the social sciences. “No laws of human behaviour or of human psychology have been discovered and we have no good reason to think that they will be” (p. 40). But, having said that, Vinten does not hesitate to insist that nonetheless, e.g., psychology, can count as a science. “However, none of this implies that psychology is not a science at all. Psychology can be said to have an empirical subject matter, to engage in systematic gathering and accumulation of knowledge, and psychologists might engage in experiments and gather data from those experiments” (p. 44). But the foregoing provides neither a necessary nor a sufficient standard for what makes an activity a science. If mathematics counts as a science, then what Vinten says is not necessary. Clearly what he says is not sufficient, since if it were coaches of sports teams as well as astrologers would fit his characterization. But about either what he assumes science to be or what follows from his views about science Vinten passes over in silence.

Debates about the status of the study of the social as scientific took their canonical form given certain philosophical views about the nature of scientific explanation, and relatedly attempts to formulate a demarcation criterion between what to count as science and what not. Formulations of the debate in terms of these issues have largely faded from the philosophical scene. Some who still oppose “the idea of a social science” typically do so in the spirit of preserving some special status of the *Geisteswissenschaft*. Also there exists no shortage of proposals as to how social sciences can be made more scientific.¹ Yet one will not find in Vinten a recognition of this literature, much less an engagement with it.

Those looking for Vinten to make good on those claims enumerated at the outset will be continually frustrated by what the book provides. One can sidestep, in this regard, the various attempts that Vinten canvasses in Chapters 3-6 to politically pigeonhole Wittgenstein the person or Wittgensteinian philosophy. For purposes of assessing the more general claims Vinten makes, the action lies in Chapters 7, “Wittgenstein and Freedom of the Will” and 8, “Wittgenstein and Justice.” For here one expects the earlier promises to be redeemed inasmuch as the very chapter titles suggest that at long last the substance of Wittgenstein’s thought will be carefully examined and Vinten’s favored account clearly extracted.

But one waits in vain. Consider Chapter 7, the shortest in the book—15 pages. Vinten reasserts in it one goal—[2]—identified at the outset, viz., “My purpose is to demonstrate the usefulness of a Wittgensteinian

approach to social and political philosophy” (p. 163). As laudable an end as this may be, any mention of Wittgenstein’s views does not occur until halfway through the chapter. And as throughout this book, Wittgensteinian aphorisms here are merely invoked, not explicated. In mounting a critique of a view championed by Churchland and Suhler on consciousness—the primary focus of discussion in this chapter, Vinten takes it as philosophically sufficient to note that:

As Wittgenstein points out, ‘only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious’. The processes underlying control do not resemble or behave like human beings in the relevant respects... Contrary to what Churchland and Suhler say, it is not a virtue of their account that they are agnostic about whether processes underlying control are conscious, it is a sign of confusion (pp. 168-9).

Q.E.D. Or perhaps not. Does it suffice to show that an account of consciousness such as the one Vinten opposes seemingly does not square with a particular remark by Wittgenstein? What was the context in which Wittgenstein makes this remark? Can a reader be assured that the issue as understood by Churchland and Suhler actually conflicts with whatever point one could take Wittgenstein to be making? And since the remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations* rarely prove to be self-interpreting, including of course the question of when or if Wittgenstein is speaking in his own voice, much more needs to be said. Nothing is.

Rather, Vinten deepens the irony of how to match up his (implied) reading of Wittgenstein with the position that he (Vinten) takes as his foil. For within of a page of the remarks just quoted Vinten acknowledges “That is not to say that Churchland and Suhler are wrong, of course.... Given that Churchland is an eliminativist, presumably she thinks that our ordinary concept of consciousness is to be eliminated and replaced by a concept from neuroscience. But the fact remains that it is not clear at all what Churchland and Suhler mean by ‘consciousness’ and so it is, at best, unclear whether they are correct” (p. 170). Since Vinten has chosen to critique the position in question, one might expect that he would do his best to clarify whether they are correct, particular by Wittgenstein’s lights as Vinten reads him. He does mount a particular critique of the position, to the effect that Churchland and Suhler “have replaced mind body dualism with brain-body dualism” (p. 174). But Vinten offers no careful analysis of Churchland’s many writing to substantiate this. Indeed, the only appearance of Wittgenstein in this chapter other than that previously cited occurs on p. 174, and this simply repeats the quote cited at p. 168. But the criticism neither requires nor presupposes anything that Wittgenstein says. Granting the characterization Vinten offers of the position he criticizes, it is sufficient unto the day to note the adversion to what Vinten terms “brain-body” dualism. Whatever Wittgenstein thought, that criticism if correct stands on its own feet. The chapter concludes at p. 175, and with it ends any expectation that on one will learn from Vinten anything regarding how Wittgenstein transforms the debate about free will.

As the title of Chapter 8 suggests, Vinten takes his lead from Pitkin’s well-known 1972 book, *Wittgenstein and Justice*. Against Pitkin’s suggestion that etymology might be key to understanding a concept, Vinten maintains:

So, in summary, Wittgenstein might be of help in philosophical discussions about justice by helping us to achieve clarity about our concepts. We can do that in various ways: by being sensitive to the fact that philosophers in the past may have used words differently to the way we do now, by being aware that we should not look for a single common element in all instances of justice, by being sensitive to the fact that ‘justice’ has a role in different language games, by examining the etymology of the word, and by producing an overview of the word ‘justice’ in relation to words like ‘fairness’, ‘impartiality’, ‘judge’, ‘judgement’, and so on (pp. 182-3).

But this could as easily be Austin as it is Wittgenstein. Additionally, Vinten's remarks hardly suggests a basis for a transformation of philosophical thinking about social and political theory, much less a distinctively Wittgensteinian one. Vinten appears to acknowledge this. "Wittgenstein himself had very little to say about justice in particular, although he did make remarks about both political and ethical matters that might help to point us in the right direction" (p. 184). So what pointers does one find as a Wittgensteinian guide through these philosophical thickets? Ironically, Vinten himself criticizes Rupert Read's supposedly Wittgensteinian criticisms of John Rawls' account of justice in the very terms that I use in taking Vinten to task:

One thing to notice about these problems is that although they have been introduced here in the context of Wittgensteinian concerns about making unwarranted assumptions these criticisms have been made by non-Wittgensteinian philosophers in the past and there is nothing particularly Wittgensteinian about them (p. 186).

Unsurprisingly, I concur. But this still leaves hanging what contribution Wittgenstein can be thought to have made in this philosophical niche.

The discussion found in Chapter 8 again exemplifies a problem endemic to Vinten's book. Having begun by trumpeting the view that Wittgensteinian thought has particular value and relevance to political issues, the chapter veers off into extended discussions of thinkers who, *unsuccessfully* on Vinten's account, tried to establish such relevance. In the case of Chapter 8, he shifts focus to works by Rupert Read, Jose Medina, and Chantal Mouffe. Vinten's considered judgment of Read's efforts have already been noted. Yet as guides to a Wittgensteinian political philosophy, Medina and Mouffe fair no better by Vinten's lights:

Medina and Mouffe's political vision is not supported by Wittgensteinian philosophy but it is not obviously in conflict with it either and the fact that remarks from Wittgenstein's philosophy do not justify Medina and Mouffe's political outlook obviously does not imply that they are wrong to hold the positions that they do" (p. 200).

But a reader of Vinten might find reason to become particularly anxious at this point. For the last quoted remark occurs at p. 200, and the book concludes at p. 202. Do world enough and time remain for demonstrating how Wittgenstein's philosophy provides *inter alia* a basis for showing how radicals could "get clearer in their political thought"?

For Vinten, apparently so. The *deus ex machina* that Vinten rolls out to save his account at the last possible second invokes mentions of so-called hinge epistemology:

Understanding the role that prejudices play in our societies can help us to understand oppression and should make us open to those who raise, what initially seem like unreasonable doubts. We should be open not only to the possibility that we might be wrong about matters of fact that can be supported with evidence but also about the beliefs we hold fast to—sensitive to the fact that they can shift. So, it seems clear that tools from Wittgenstein's later work can help us to understand and combat oppression, although it certainly does not go all of the way in formulating ways to tackle oppression. Determining strategies for fighting oppression relies on thinking about the current concrete circumstances and so it goes beyond the kind of Wittgensteinian philosophizing we have been discussing here but Wittgenstein's work can complement the work of people fighting oppression by giving us tools to help us to understand epistemic injustices better (p. 201).

The first two sentences assert what can be taken at best as truisms, although the trick as always concerns a way to sort doubts that are "unreasonable" from those that are not. The sentences owe nothing in any case to Wittgenstein.

But how then to understand the third sentence? Beginning as it does with ‘So,’ one might once more expect or imagine that it precedes a statement of a conclusion of an argument. Yet what argument has Vinten made? One has the assertion that a label used for certain propositions “might” be of use, though instead of substantiating this claim about this way of reading Wittgenstein, Vinten characteristically undercuts it. “Working on developing a feminist hinge epistemology would help to broaden the range of problems dealt with by hinge epistemologists and so would help to overcome this problem. But the narrow focus of much of contemporary hinge epistemology is not the only problem. Ashton thinks that many hinge epistemologists have failed to take pragmatism sufficiently seriously” (p. 202) So Vinten sees at best a yet to be realized potential. And then, the end.

Having begun with a promise to show the relevance of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy to post-liberal radical thought, Vinten baldly asserts that the promise has been fulfilled:

So, despite the fact that Wittgenstein’s work cannot be easily pigeonholed in terms of ideology, and despite the fact that it does not support a particular political programme, it can be used to help untangle conceptual knots in the work of social scientists and can be used to help us to understand other cultures, the ways in which people are oppressed, and the nature of prejudice, as well as many other things (p. 202).

But no conceptual knot has been untied anywhere in this book. Much less will a reader find even the beginning of a case for how in some serious philosophical way Wittgenstein could be of use in doing this sort of work.

Even more oddly, recent work that does do this, or does this in a related way, is dismissed or ignored. For one, Bernard Williams’s discussion of left and right Wittgensteinianism is dismissed in barely a sentence (p. 88, fn. 5).² For another, although Vinten lists Miranda Fricker’s book *Epistemic Injustice* in his bibliography, it otherwise receives no mention or discussion in the body of his work. More generally, those now working on what has come to be called in the analytic tradition “philosophical genealogy”—this includes works by Williams and Fricker noted above—attempt to do in fact what Vinten only offers by way of empty promises. Many would welcome a serious attempt to evaluate how philosophy when brought down from the Platonic heavens might fruitfully engage in evaluating or, to use a formulation favored by Queloz, “reverse engineer” epistemic and normative concepts. That would be a discussion well worth having.³ Vinten, however, remains mute on all substantive topics. How this book ends illustrates why it never really begins.

NOTES

- 1 Works by Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus exemplify the former view. For a range of options regarding the latter position, a variety of interesting and provocative proposals can be found in the works such as those by Jared Diamond, Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd, and Alexander Rosenberg.
- 2 For a sustained discussion of how the debate on the political implications of Wittgenstein’s thought appears from this angle, see Queloz and Cueni 2021.
- 3 Fricker 2007; for a more general exploration of genealogical method as a tool for the normative assessment of concepts, see Queloz 2021.

REFERENCES

- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
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