

Denis Seron. Review of: K. Mulligan, *Wittgenstein et la philosophie austro-allemande* (Paris: Vrin, 2012). *Dialectica*, Volume 70, Issue 1 (March 2016): 125–128.

Wittgenstein is usually regarded at once as a founding father of analytical philosophy, the prodigal son of Frege, Russell, and Moore, and a boisterous brother of Ramsey and logical empiricists. Although Wittgenstein was Austrian and spent most of his life in Austria, this family tree includes none of the philosophers that Kevin Mulligan calls “Austro-German philosophers”, namely Brentano and his direct and indirect followers. Mulligan’s ambitious aim in this book is to show not only that the usual depiction is historically misleading, but also that Austro-German philosophers were Wittgenstein’s main interlocutors in a wide range of issues at the heart of his philosophy.

The book contains eight essays, some of which are parts or revised versions of papers previously published in English. Their common purpose is twofold (12, 223): first, to identify the areas of agreement and disagreement between Wittgenstein and “phenomenologists”, and second, to discuss which views are preferable. The first purpose is historical, the second is philosophical. The book admirably achieves both objectives. It offers a brilliant, insightful, richly documented discussion of issues that are central to both Wittgenstein and phenomenologists, going through an impressive amount of concepts and views.

In some ways, the first chapter, “Description, differences, and discoveries”, is the real crux of the book. Mulligan’s suggestion here is that Wittgenstein and phenomenologists, in spite of obvious differences, share a common understanding of what philosophy is and how it should be practiced. All regard description (as opposed to causal explanation) as the proper method of philosophy, and this view very plausibly stems from Brentano. (Mulligan also mentions Dilthey, and could have mentioned other empiricists like Ernst Mach or even Hume.) The author enumerates some crucial features of the descriptive method: analyzing, distinguishing, exemplifying, “intuiting”, etc. Among many other things, he develops the central idea — found in Wittgenstein and Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* — that “philosophy deals in trivialities” (30). Philosophical discoveries, unlike those of empirical sciences, are never

surprising. The remainder of the chapter is then devoted to divergences, the most obvious of which are about the (theoretical or therapeutic) function and the (psychological or linguistic) object of description: “While his predecessors conceive of description as being about the complexity of mental states and episodes and of their objects, Wittgenstein holds that it describes language and the use of words.” (47)

Chapters 2 and 3 provide a very surprising dialogue between Wittgenstein and the realist phenomenologist Max Scheler on several topics related to mind and mental acts. After having identified a range of questions that have occupied both philosophers, the author devotes a large part of these chapters to Wittgenstein’s thesis that there are no private objects — a thesis which he quite unexpectedly finds operating in Scheler’s *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*. The difference, Mulligan points out, is that for Scheler mental acts are public objects, while for Wittgenstein they are not objects at all (65-66). Chapter 3 also contains a thorough discussion of the Husserlian notion of “meaning” (*meinen*). The author shows convincingly that most of the questions raised by Wittgenstein with respect to the *Meinen* — Is it essentially linguistic? Is it identical with thinking? Is it a process? etc. — were widely debated among Austro-German philosophers (Meinong, Marty, Reinach, Scheler) in the years following the publication of the *Logical Investigations*.

The next two chapters of the book are about sense and nonsense. Chapter 4, “Sense, Nonsense, and Modalities”, opens with an original, subtle reading of Husserl’s pure grammar in terms of *de re* and *de dicto* modalities, which is then confronted with Wittgenstein’s “geography of sense and nonsense”. In Chapter 5, “Meanings”, among other things, Wittgenstein’s picture theory of language is discussed in the context of Austro-German controversies over the presentational function of language (Marty, Bühler, Scheler). Likewise, Wittgenstein’s view that the meaning of an expression is constituted by the rules of its use is compared and contrasted with similar views found in Marty, Bühler, and the Finnish philosopher Erik Ahlman.

Chapter 6, “Words and Slabs”, is a substantially revised version of a paper that has been published in English in 1997 and in French in 2004 (in a translation by Didier Samain). It has two parts. The first summarizes some key aspects of Bühler’s “empirico-teleological view” of language, starting from the following distinctions: expressive, representative, and steering functions of language; symptoms, symbols, and signals; *Sprechhandlung* and *Sprachwerk*; *Sprechakt* and *Sprachgebilde*; words and fields. In the second part of the chapter, the author

explores the close relationships between Bühler's conception and some of Wittgenstein's most important views on language, including his critique of the Augustinian picture. A crucial difference, however, is that Bühler, unlike Wittgenstein, assigns to language a presentational function (143).

In Chapter 7, Wittgenstein's views on colors are discussed in connection with Meinong's *Remarks on the color solid and the law of mixtures* (1903). Both philosophers agree that there are necessary truths about colors — for example “red is different from green”, “orange is between red and yellow” —, and that “the internal relations amongst colors are best represented by the color octahedron” of Höfler and Ebbinghaus (159). The principal differences are these: For Meinong necessary truths about colors can be asserted, they refer to the “nature” of colors and belong to the theory of object; for Wittgenstein they cannot be asserted, they do not refer to the “nature” of colors, they are partly conventional and of a logico-linguistic nature. Finally, the author draws interesting parallels between Wittgenstein's late interest in “impure colors” and similar concerns reflected in the work of Husserl's student David Katz.

The eighth and final chapter of the book deals with “primitive certainties” — a (Russellian and Husserlian) term intended to encompass Ortega's “basic or unfounded beliefs”, Husserl's “naïve certainties”, Wittgenstein's “certainties” and “fast-standing” propositions (*On Certainty*, §152), Scheler's “simple or straightforward beliefs”, and some aspects of Searle's background beliefs (182-183). For example, you are certain that walls are impenetrable, as witnessed by the fact that you never try to walk through them. The author extensively discusses answers given by Wittgenstein and Austro-German philosophers to questions such as these: Are primitive certainties beliefs? Are they knowledge? Are they justified? Can they justify (non-primitive) beliefs? Do they exhibit degrees? Do they form a system?

In the conclusion, the author comes back to his initial question of which of the two perspectives is preferable. He suggests that some law-like descriptions given by Austro-German philosophers are equivalent with some Wittgenstein's rule-like descriptions, and thus equally plausible. Why should this not apply to some Austro-German descriptions that have no equivalent in Wittgenstein's corpus? Mulligan leaves this question open for further discussion. However, he claims that the choice between Wittgenstein's and Austro-German approach must depend on our answers to the following questions: (1) Do the rules of a

domain form a system? (2) Does their explanation require appeal to essences and systems of necessary connections amongst phenomena?

There is much to be admired in this book. The fruit of three decades of research by a leading figure in contemporary metaphysics and Austrian philosophy, it not only enables us to interpret Wittgenstein's work in a wholly new light, it also grapples with a huge variety of philosophical issues many of which, although of great philosophical interest, are completely absent in current debates. The discussion of the descriptive method in Chapter 1 is a good example of this, being both new and potentially crucial to the current controversies on intuition and a priori.

The purpose of the book is by no means to establish Wittgenstein as an "Austro-German philosopher", but rather to re-open a dialogue between Wittgenstein and a tradition that was close and familiar to him. Thus, the differences are stressed at least as much as the similarities, and it is one of the strong points of the book that it enables us to better understand what is really new in Wittgenstein's thought. The most outstanding differences are the following: (1) Brentano's heirs are concerned with mental life, while Wittgenstein is concerned with the use of words; (2) unlike Wittgenstein, some of them consider a priori laws to form a system of truths; (3) Wittgenstein clearly dissociates himself from the essentialism and intuitionism of some phenomenologists.

Another strength of the book is that it aims to be both historical and philosophical. However, this may be a drawback in some ways. Not all similarities between different authors' views can be attributed to real historical connections. Some may be mere family resemblances due to chance or common cultural background. (Mulligan's claim is that in many cases there are "more than family resemblances" (223).) It is not always clear in the book which kind of similarity is being invoked. Thus, the reader is sometimes left with somewhat frustrating questions such as, "Had Wittgenstein really read X?" "Was it possible for him to do so?". Certainly, one may doubt whether these questions make sense in the case of Wittgenstein. In any case they were out of the scope of the book. As the author says in the conclusion: "In this book nothing has been affirmed or assumed about Wittgenstein's 'sources', except what Wittgenstein himself affirms." (225) In spite of the dazzling erudition displayed, the book under review is the work more of a philosopher than of a historian, and should be read as such.

An interesting question raised in the book is whether Wittgenstein's appropriation of the label "phenomenology" should be taken seriously. The author clearly answers the question in the negative, drawing on the obvious difference between grammatical rules and "essential" laws supposedly governing experience. "Wittgenstein, he claims, has never been a phenomenologist, even when he said that his work belonged to 'phenomenology'." (153) In support of this idea he cites passages from Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colors* (178): "Looking does not teach us anything about the concepts of colors"; "There is no such thing as phenomenology" (Mulligan, however, omits the second half of the sentence: "but there are indeed phenomenological problems" — which brings Wittgenstein somewhat closer to Carl Stumpf's view that phenomenology is not an autonomous theory, but a pre-scientific practice that gives the observational basis of all theories). Yet the question may deserve further scrutiny. It is debatable whether phenomenology and conceptual analysis are mutually exclusive as Mulligan suggests. Brentano and some of his disciples — Anton Marty, for example — seem to fit into both categories: they view a priori relations as purely conceptual or "analytic", and logical laws as practical rules. Of course, a major difference is that their concern with conceptual relations remains broadly psychological. Nevertheless, I think this parallel may hint at even deeper affinities than those pointed out in the book.