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Envisioning a Worthwhile Critique of Idealism: Reflections on the Frege-Wittgenstein Correspondence

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Abstract

A familiar dynamic emerges in the ongoing exegetical debates surrounding Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* so-called “resolute readers” develop and defend interpretations of the work based primarily upon the text itself, and so-called “irresolute readers” challenge these interpretations by appealing to extra-textual evidence, such as the testimony of contemporaries or retrospective remarks in which Wittgenstein seemingly implies prior commitment to one or another metaphysical thesis that resolute readers claim he opposed. The present paper inverts this familiar dynamic by invoking extra-textual evidence to challenge irresolute readings. In closely analyzing the final letter of the Frege-Wittgenstein correspondence, three key elements come to the fore: (i) Wittgenstein apparently acknowledges a “deep, true nucleus” in idealism (Schmitt 2003: 30); (ii) nevertheless, he aims to *fight against or attack* idealism, indicating that, initial appearances notwithstanding, he was not committed to an ineffable metaphysical doctrine; and (iii) his primary point of contention with Frege on this issue stems from their divergent conceptions of critique, with Wittgenstein alleging that Frege’s criticism of idealism does not go far enough. Taken together, these points engender a significant challenge for irresolute readings and suggest Wittgenstein’s conception of “worthwhile” philosophical critique as a potential source of continuity across his significant philosophical evolution (Frege 1977: vii).

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In the preface to his English translation of Frege’s *Logical Investigations*, a compendium of articles Frege published in the idealist journal *Beiträge zur Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus*, P. T. Geach relays several pointed opinions expressed by Wittgenstein in the last months of his life. “Wittgenstein” advised me to translate ‘die Vereinigung’, but not ‘Der Gedanke’, Geach writes, “that, he considered, was an inferior work—it attacked idealism on its weak side, whereas a worthwhile criticism of idealism would attack it just where it was strongest” (ibid). This dim view of ‘Der Gedanke’ is quite striking in light of Wittgenstein’s wide-ranging and oft-expressed admiration for Frege’s philosophical work (some of which Geach duly notes in his preface). Wittgenstein’s focus on idealism is equally surprising. Frege spends little time on the discussion and dismissal of idealism in ‘Der Gedanke,’ as they are ancillary to the article’s overarching objective. In fact, Frege does not employ the term “idealism” even once, and Wittgenstein himself barely mentions it in the *Tractatus*. Yet Wittgenstein’s complaint was no mere offhand remark. As Geach reports, “Wittgenstein... made this point to Frege in correspondence Frege could not understand—for him, idealism was the enemy he had long fought, and of course you attacked your enemy on his weak side” (ibid). Thus, Wittgenstein’s dissatisfaction with Frege’s attack on idealism was severe enough that it still stood out in memory some thirty-two years later and led him to express the need for a more robust critique at the time (ibid).

The discovery of around five-hundred letters addressed to Wittgenstein in the storeroom of a real-estate broker in Vienna in June 1988 has bequeathed us Frege’s side of their correspondence, and these letters go a long way towards illuminating Wittgenstein’s views (See Floyd 2011a: 1). Over the course of his confinement in a prisoner-of-war camp in Monte Cassino, Wittgenstein exchanged a number of letters and army postcards with Frege. In early 1919, he finally managed to send Frege a typescript copy of the *Tractatus* through his sister, Hermine. Frege’s first response to the typescript arrived, with apologies for the delay, some six months later and an offprint of *Der Gedanke* was sent as “a return gift” shortly afterwards (Floyd 2011b: 47). In his response, Frege severely criticized the *Tractatus* for its overly “artistic” form and evinced an insistent, if amicable, inability to parse its contents and grasp its purpose (Schmitt 2003: 25). Wittgenstein found this failure of mutual comprehension immensely frustrating, as his contemporaneous letters to Bertrand Russell attest, and it seems that he nearly despairs of making himself understood. Nevertheless, he undertook what he described to Russell as the “thoroughly exhaust[ing]” work of providing Frege with “what are purely and simply explanations” (CC 1995: 124). These explanations would be an invaluable resource for contemporary scholarship, but Wittgenstein’s
letters were evidently destroyed in the bombing of The Frege-Archiv during the Second World War.

Fortunately, much valuable information can be gleaned from Frege's side of the correspondence. Here we will focus on Frege's final letter to Wittgenstein, dated April 3rd, 1920. I quote the opening in full:

Many thanks for your letter of 19 March! Naturally I do not take your frankness amiss. But I would like to know which deep grounds of idealism you believe that I have not grasped. I thought I understood that you did not consider epistemological idealism to be true. Accordingly I believe you realize that there are no deeper grounds for this idealism at all. Its grounds could then only be apparent grounds, not logical [ones]. One is indeed sometimes led astray by language, because language does not always suffice for logical claims. Indeed concerning the formation of language, besides the logical capabilities of humans, there is very much psychological that is important. Logical errors do not stem from logic, but rather come from the impurities or disturbances to which the logical activity of mankind is exposed. My intention was not to investigate [the] psycho-linguistic origin of all such disturbances. Please just go through my essay about thoughts as far as the proposition with which you do not agree, and write me this proposition and the grounds of your divergence. Thus I would better recognize what you have in mind. Perhaps I have never fought against idealism in the sense that you believe it should be fought against. I have hardly ever used the expression "idealism" at all. Take my propositions entirely as they stand, without attributing to me an intention that would perhaps be foreign to me (Schmitt, 2003: 28-29, Letter XXI).

Four key elements of interest arise in this passage. First, it is evident from the opening lines that Wittgenstein's prior letter contains sharp criticism of 'Der Gedanke,' confirming the veracity of his report to Geach. Second, it seems that Wittgenstein's primary, and possibly sole, target of criticism is Frege's treatment of idealism and that he specifically objected that Frege's critique of idealism does not go far enough. Indeed, Frege concedes in the letter that he may never have fought against idealism in "the sense that [Wittgenstein] believe[s] it should be fought against." (Ibid.) Third, Frege's reply provides some insight into what sort of worthwhile attack Wittgenstein envisions, namely an investigation and unmasking of the psychological and linguistic origins of idealism (Frege 1977: vii). This is a point to which we will return in the conclusion. The fourth key point in this passage consists in Wittgenstein's implication that Frege failed to grasp the "deep grounds of idealism" (Schmitt 2003: 29). When considered in combination with the second key element, the need to fight against idealism, this suggestion of "deep grounds" may seem quite puzzling.

Indeed, Frege himself was perplexed by this and seems to have gone back over Wittgenstein's prior letters in an attempt to clarify its meaning. However, these efforts only increased his uncertainty, and his final letter concludes with a call for further elucidation:

Just now I gather further from one of your earlier letters that you acknowledge in idealism a deep, true nucleus, an important feeling, which is falsely satisfied, yet nevertheless is a legitimate need. What then is this need?

It would please me if, by means of your replies to my questions, you make the understanding of the results of your thoughts easier.

With warm greetings in old friendship.

Yours, G. Frege

Here, Frege states outright that Wittgenstein "acknowledge[s] in idealism a deep, true nucleus" (Floyd and Dreben translate this as "deep and true core", some sort of "falsely satisfied" feeling that nevertheless represents "a legitimate need" (Schmitt 2003: 30-31). What exactly is the "deep, true nucleus" Wittgenstein recognizes in idealism? And what is the important feeling, the genuine need, that gives rise to it? As far as we know, Wittgenstein never replied, so Frege's questions remain unanswered. An adequate examination of the first would extend beyond the scope of this article. We may, however, make progress on the second based on the resources at hand.

Consider the striking combination of attitudes that Frege's letter ascribes to Wittgenstein. On the one hand, he acknowledges "a deep, true nucleus" underlying idealism (Schmitt 2003: 30). This attitude indicates a connection between Wittgenstein's views on idealism and "the problem, how much truth there is in solipsism," which passages from Notebooks 1914-16 confirm (TLPI 1972: 65.2; and see TB 161: 85e, 15.10.16). Thus, these passages bear directly on the fundamental question of whether Wittgenstein "was not only tempted, but succumbed" to "idealism or solipsism" during this period (Hacker 1986: 104). But if he had indeed succumbed to such a view how can we explain the second attitude that Frege ascribes him? If he felt that idealist theses were "perfectly correct," though ultimately inexpressible, why did he believe that idealism should be fought against and attacked on its strong side, rather than, say, vindicated or subtly conveyed? (Hacker 2000: 382) This extra-textual evidence renders the likely standard account of this "legitimate need" as the drive to communicate transcendent, ineffable truths radically implausible, posing a potent interpretive challenge for resolute readers (Schmitt 2003: 30).

On a resolute reading, however, this seemingly contradictory combination of attitudes receives elegant explanation. Wittgenstein possesses a personal understanding of the deeply human yearning to vitiate "the right method of philosophy" and craft "unanswerable metaphysical theses" (TLPI 1972: 65.3). Indeed, Wittgenstein grasps of just how "unsatisfying" it can be to stick to tractable scientific and philosophical problems, and of "how little has been done" when such problems have been solved, is in large part what distinguishes his approach from the seemingly consonant views of Carnap and the logical positivists (ibid: 65.3, Preface). However, the fact that Wittgenstein understood—and indeed, felt—the appeal of metaphysical or mystical theses by no means implies that he thought them perfectly correct or that he aimed to communicate them to his readers. Rather, I would suggest, it is precisely this understanding that undergirds Wittgenstein's dissatisfaction with Frege's critique of idealism. In his final letter, Frege disavows an intention "to investigate [the] psycho-linguistic origin" of the mistakes that give rise to idealism, indicating that such investigation stands as one of the standards of worthwhile critique that Wittgenstein felt Frege failed to reach (Schmitt 2003: 28). And Frege's admission that "one is indeed sometimes led astray by language" strongly suggests that Wittgenstein had made this point in his own letter (Schmitt 2003: 28, my emphasis). The echoes of the Preface to the Tractatus here are profound and all of this fits nicely with resolute readers' suggestion that Wittgenstein's goal in the work is to demonstrate or dramatize the psychological errors and linguistic illusions that can lead one to attempt to step beyond the limits of language, mistaking what is "simply nonsense" for profound insight into the fundamental nature of reality (Conant 2000: 198).
The next natural step in this inquiry would be to investigate where and to what extent Wittgenstein took himself to have developed and deployed such a "worthwhile criticism of idealism" within the *Tractatus* (Frey 1977: vii). Such a step would take us beyond the scope of this paper. However, to conclude we might note some features of the general conception of philosophical critique that Wittgenstein exhibits in his rebuke of Frege. In *Culture & Value*, Wittgenstein wrote, "Getting hold of the difficulty deep down is what is hard. Because if it is grasped near the surface it simply remains the difficulty it was. It has to be pulled out by the roots; and that involves our beginning to think about these things in a new way..." (VB 1980: 48e). This, I would suggest, offers an apt encapsulation of the core of Wittgenstein’s dissatisfaction with Frege’s criticism of idealism. Wittgenstein felt that in ‘Der Gedanke’ Frege attacked idealism “on its weak side” and failed to uproot the deep core of the view, leaving matters relatively unchanged (Frey 1977: vii). By investigating the psychological origins of the view and the particular features of our language that give rise to it, Wittgenstein hoped to develop a new way of thinking, one that would help his readers “see the world aright” and pass over unanswerable metaphysical issues in silence (TLP 1972: 6.54). Ultimately, this undertaking turned out to be the work of a lifetime. Thus, Wittgenstein’s dissatisfaction with Frege’s critique of idealism not only offers an explanatory challenge for standard or ‘irresolute’ readers but may also suggest a potential source of significant continuity across his philosophical development.

**Bibliography**


