Book Review


This ambitious and wide-ranging collection of essays was conceived as a response to the current predicament of those working on Wittgenstein’s philosophy, or doing work influenced by Wittgenstein. Though these remain highly active areas of research, they were once a central part of the analytic tradition but are now widely regarded as peripheral. Those of us working on Wittgenstein’s relevance for present-day philosophy know that there is a great deal of new and exciting work going on. Yet that work gets relatively little attention from those working in other areas of philosophy. In their preface, the co-editors frame this predicament, and its relationship to the essays collected in their volume, in the following terms:

[N]owadays, Wittgenstein scholarship—that is, the historical study of the philosopher and his philosophy—continues to thrive, while Wittgensteinian philosophy—that is, both Wittgenstein’s philosophy itself and philosophy practiced in the same manner—is increasingly perceived by many philosophers as being, at best, at the periphery of current concerns and debates. Wittgenstein’s influence on the analytic tradition was particularly strong, but analytic philosophers are evidently finding it increasingly difficult to see the relevance of much of Wittgenstein’s work for contemporary analytic philosophy. This volume strives to repair this recent disconnection of the analytic tradition from one of its founding figures by analyzing Wittgensteinian methods and points of view both from an exegetical perspective and with a view to the contemporary significance of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. (p. x)

As the book’s title suggests, the thematic focus is on metaphilosophy, philosophy of language, and epistemology. Contributors were encouraged to approach their chosen topics in whatever way they found most fruitful, in the belief that since ‘the volume seeks to both interpret and apply Wittgenstein’s philosophy . . . more free-spirited variations on it should be permitted, or indeed encouraged’ (p. x).

Appropriately, the book begins with a pair of essays on the nature of Wittgenstein’s conception of meaning and philosophical method, broadly conceived. The first, ‘Anatomy of a Muddle: Wittgenstein and Philosophy’,
by Alexander George, is a careful examination of Wittgenstein’s criticism of philosophy, and of some of the most common misunderstandings of that criticism. He starts from a line of thought frequently attributed to Wittgenstein:

1. To employ an expression in an unordinary way is to utter nonsense.
2. Philosophers often employ expressions in unordinary ways.
3. Hence, philosophers often utter nonsense. (p. 3)

However, as George makes abundantly clear, there is no good reason to attribute the first premise to Wittgenstein, or the correlative conception of him as an ‘ordinary language philosopher’ drawing up rules for the ordinary use of language with which to police what others say and charge them with breaking those rules. By way of a close reading of the Blue Book, George shows that Wittgenstein, far from dismissing unusual or unconventional uses of language as nonsense, repeatedly pays close attention to them. Summing up his reply to the conventional view of Wittgenstein as building on a foundation of the rules of language that we supposedly take for granted, George observes that:

it is misleading to say that Wittgenstein believes there is such a thing as ‘the ordinary way’ in which words are used: his explorations reveal highly varied and perhaps even uncircumscribable ways in which we put our language to use. There is no determinate totality of uses that constitutes ‘ordinary usage’. (p. 10)

Furthermore, even if there were such a linguistic rulebook that we do all follow, that would not mean that we had to stick to it: there would be nothing to stop us improvising, as we so often do. On George’s reading, the key to appreciating Wittgenstein’s critique of a philosopher’s innovative or out of the ordinary use of words is that ‘the problem is that her stance toward her words is irresolute: she has not settled how she wants to use them (and does not realize this)’ (p. 11). Crucially, on this view of where traditional philosophy goes wrong, there is no appeal to some general theory of meaning, or other principles of language use, but rather the more general objection arises out of a close examination of particular philosophical theories. In keeping with this, most of the paper turns on a close reading of Wittgenstein’s handling of a number of such cases, while also sketching the relevance of that reading for closely related arguments in the work of figures such as Frege, Quine and Sellars.

Julia Tanney approaches Wittgenstein’s conception of meaning and method more freely in ‘Explaining What We Mean’. She takes as her point of departure an example approached in a Wittgensteinian spirit, ‘a rough sketch of a few of the considerations that govern . . . what might be considered core or literal, as opposed to peripheral or figurative, applications of the expression “mother” and various subdivisions of this general category’ (p. 31).
Tanney argues that not only is there a variety of central and accepted uses of the term, including but not limited to those of a birth mother, step mother, or adoptive mother, but that often ‘what we mean, if we are to be understood, is settled by factors that override any scope or latitude we might have for drawing boundaries on our part’ (p. 30). Like George, she undermines the widely taken-for-granted assumption that we must know what our words mean by showing that their meaning often depends on the circumstances in which they are used, circumstances that may be very different from what one might expect at first sight. This in turn leads her to an extended critique of a neo-Fregean conception of meaning as a realm of abstract objects, the concepts we grasp in thought that give meaning to words, and the propositions they make up which are the bearers of truth and falsity (p. 32 ff.) At the end of her essay, Tanney briefly sketches an alternative perspective on this terrain, one on which understanding a language is best understood if we look at it not so much in terms of learning the fixed meaning of words as a matter of becoming a proficient participant in an embodied and shared activity:

Perhaps learning to speak and understand a language is like learning to dance: the movements of our feet, the position and trajectory of our bodies, and the ability to move with others are mastered in tandem. . . . [W]e engage with one another in a common activity, with shared goals, similar natural reactions and complementary training. If we want to take our partners in a certain direction, we will lead and they will follow. Their ability to follow—to understand what we say—will be all the more enhanced by the exercise of our own capacity to explain what we mean’. (pp. 45, 46)

The next six essays turn to somewhat more narrowly defined topics. In ‘Objectivity’, Alice Crary explores the dialectic between two different conceptions of objectivity. On the narrower conception of objectivity, the objective and the subjective are treated as diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive: ‘subjective’ simply means ‘non-objective’. Thus any quality ‘that can’t adequately be characterized without reference to responses that objects that possess them elicit from subjects’ (pp. 47-48), which includes not only secondary qualities, but many everyday concepts, must be classified as merely subjective. On the wider conception of objectivity, which Crary defends here, ‘subjective’ is to be understood separately and independently, as ‘subject-dependent’, in the sense of “conceivable only in terms of effects on subjects”.’ (p 49) While this may at first seem like an arcane distinction, it has far-reaching implications. For it promises to transform how we approach many domains of philosophical inquiry, including aesthetics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, political philosophy and ethics (p. 61) that have been shaped by the narrower conception’s conviction that subject-dependent aspects of the world cannot count as objective. Crary’s argument for this conclusion weaves together criticism of Thomas Nagel’s and Bernard Williams’s discussions of the ‘absolute conception’ of objectivity with
discussion of Wittgenstein on rule following and private language, and of work in this area by John McDowell, James Conant, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, among others.

In ‘The Methodological Significance of Intuitions in Philosophy’, Oskari Kuusela criticizes the appeal to intuitions as the explanation of our comprehension of logical, conceptual or metaphysical possibilities and necessities. He concentrates on the work of Ernest Sosa and George Bealer, two leading proponents of the view that intuitions are a source of knowledge of logical, mathematical, conceptual, or metaphysical necessities and possibilities. Kuusela observes that their talk of intuitions covers a wide variety of rather different phenomena, ranging from general capacities or competences on the one hand, to particular instances or examples. These in turn range all the way from intuitions about the most elementary everyday cases, as in the claim that under standard conditions ‘the episode of it seeming to me that it is correct to apply the word “chair” to the object counts as an example of a reliable intuition about concept application’ (p. 77), to sophisticated philosophical doctrines, such as Saul Kripke’s thesis that ‘we have a direct intuition of the rigidity of names’ (p. 78). Kuusela argues that postulating a generalized competence is philosophically unhelpful, that the indisputable simple cases are not matters of intuition at all, and that the complex ones are disputable, and so cannot count as evidence in the relevant sense. The chapter concludes by sketching the connections between this critique and Wittgenstein’s observation that what we are inclined to say in such cases ‘is, of course, not philosophy; but it is its raw material ... something for philosophical treatment’ (Philosophical Investigations §254, emphasis in original).

In ‘Wittgenstein on “Seeing Meanings”’, Katherine J. Morris draws out connections between Wittgenstein’s remarks on aspect seeing and his reading of Köhler. She observes that most commentators give little attention to the use of ‘see’ with which aspect-seeing is contrasted. For some commentators the contrast is with what Köhler calls the ‘analytic’ mode of perception, where the objects of sight are shapes and colours; while for a second group, the contrast is with the ‘normal’ mode of perception, where we are ‘seeing things’. The resulting discussion is judiciously developed and builds towards the conclusion that ‘seeing a meaning’ is as much a part of our seeing things as it is in the case of seeing aspects. There is much to admire about this essay, both in its close reading of key passages and in the case it makes for the intricate and complex character of the only-too-often taken-for-granted ‘ordinary perception’ of ‘mere things’ (p. 99). However, because there is little discussion of the views it opposes, it does not entirely succeed in contributing to the book’s overall project of arguing for Wittgenstein’s contemporary relevance.

Fortunately, Avner Baz’s complementary ‘Bringing the Phenomenal World into View’ not only covers closely related terrain in the philosophy
of perception but gives equally thorough attention to a critique of Kantian views of mind and world in general, and their role in recent work by Charles Travis and John McDowell. Like Morris, he both gives a central role to the question of how to understand the notion of seeing an aspect and draws on Merleau-Ponty as well as Wittgenstein. Borrowing from Crary’s framing of conceptions of objectivity, one can say Baz’s central claim is that epistemology’s focus on a narrowly objective conception of the world has blinded philosophers, not only to the virtues of a more broadly objective conception, but to its very possibility. At the outset, he characterizes that conception of the world ‘as perceived and responded to prior to being thought, or thought (or talked) about, “the phenomenal world”’ (p. 101, emphasis in original). Summing up at the end of his exploration of the case for the centrality of the phenomenal world in our understanding of perception, he characterizes it as ‘a world of perceivable, physiognomic sense, which . . . should be understood in terms of affective and motor value—that is, value, not for our Kantian “understanding”, but for our phenomenal body’ (p. 118, emphasis in original).

Michael Beaney’s ‘First Steps and Conceptual Creativity’ explores some of the connections between Wittgenstein’s talk in §308 of Philosophical Investigations of the ‘first step’ in philosophizing being ‘the one that altogether escapes notice . . . [T]hat’s just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter’, Wittgenstein’s characteristic way of approaching philosophical problems, and the role of conceptual creativity there. Wisely, Beaney takes a step back from the well-worn path of approaching Wittgenstein’s talk of a ‘first step’ primarily as a key to the discussion of private language in the preceding sections of the Investigations. Starting from Wittgenstein’s discussion of how philosophical problems arise in §308 and its manuscript sources, Beaney draws valuable connections with Wittgenstein’s discussion of sudden understanding and aspect change, showing how such concepts ‘are complex, inextricably interconnected, and circumstance-dependent, and continually shift as we attempt to express and make sense of our mental lives. This is revealed not only in the philosophical disputes in which we become trapped, but also in such everyday experiences as noticing a new aspect in something we see’ (p. 126). After reviewing a number of different conceptions of conceptual creativity, he observes that while the crucial step may seem to occur all of a sudden and out of the blue, just like experiences of sudden understanding and aspect change, here too the ‘Eureka!’ moment depends on a prior history and complex background that makes the transformative moment possible. Beaney then applies the Wittgensteinian framework he has developed to the case of Frege’s ‘first step’—his use of function-argument analysis, and his view that concepts are functions. He argues that developing the new ways of seeing needed to recognize when such a first step leads us into a blind alley is itself a paradigm of a certain sort of conceptual creativity. Thus, even though in Wittgenstein’s
‘philosophy what we are looking at, on Wittgenstein’s view, does indeed stay the same—our use of words ... yet the aim is to see it differently, by identifying a first step and gaining an Übersicht [overview], to enable us to resolve a philosophical problem’ (p. 141).

In ‘Wittgenstein and Analytic Revisionism’, Martin Gustafsson explores a closely related set of issues. Like Beaney, he offers us insights into how to understand ‘Wittgenstein’s notorious dictum that philosophy “leaves everything as it is”’ (p. 143, _Philosophical Investigations_ §124). However, Gustafsson concentrates on Wittgenstein’s differences with analytical revisionists: philosophers who explicitly reject this conception, because they hold that our language is, in various ways, defective, and that philosophy should propose new ways of speaking. Carnapians aim for language that is more exact, Quineans for language that is ontologically parsimonious, Rortyans for language that liberates us from obsolete ideology, but all are analytical revisionists in holding that philosophy should not leave our language ‘as it is’. Gustafsson’s paper judiciously lays out the ways in which the early Wittgenstein was already a non-revisionist and clarifies exactly how the later non-revisionism differs. In conclusion, Gustafsson offers a new perspective on the worry that non-revisionism’s insistence on leaving ‘everything as it is’ is unnecessarily constraining, in that it would prevent philosophers from coming up with ‘new and better ways of describing and investigating the world’ (p. 162). However, on Gustafsson’s mapping of the disputed terrain, it is the revisionist that has adopted unfruitful restrictions on what can count as a genuine philosophical problem. For in identifying certain ordinary ways of talking as dispensable, and so open to revision, the revisionist is committed to discarding any philosophical problems associated with those ways of talking. However, some of those very problems, if taken seriously, will raise a challenge to the criteria that the revisionist invokes in order to dismiss them, and so the revisionist’s dismissal of those problems turns out to be question-begging. Such problems ‘can be adequately dealt with only if we do not proceed along revisionist lines, but are instead patient enough to leave everything as it is’ (p. 163, emphasis in original).

The next three essays each discuss linguistic meaning. Silver Bronzo’s ‘Demystifying Meaning in Horwich and Wittgenstein’ is a critical review of Paul Horwich’s Wittgenstein-inspired use-theory of meaning, on which, in Horwich’s words, “to put it bluntly ... meaning facts reduce to underlying nonintentional facts of word use” (p. 164, emphasis in original). On Horwich’s reading of the later Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein finds the notion of meaning to be deeply mysterious, and so in need of demystification by means of a reductive analysis to non-normative regularities. Putting to one side the question of the adequacy of Horwich’s intricate analysis, Silver’s chapter is devoted to showing that Horwich’s attribution to Wittgenstein of the purported problem turns on missing the point of Wittgenstein’s discussion of meaning and mystery in the _Philosophical Investigations_. Horwich
takes Wittgenstein to be saying that meaning is mysterious, and so in need of philosophical underpinning. But as Silver shows in careful detail, far from endorsing any such view, Wittgenstein holds that ‘there is no real mystery here’ (p. 171). Indeed, the very idea that meaning is mysterious, and so needs to be demystified by means of a reductive analysis in terms of very different concepts, is precisely the view that Wittgenstein devotes a great deal of time and ingenuity to sympathetically criticizing. On Bronzo’s reading of Wittgenstein’s remarks on meaning, Wittgenstein’s aim is to clarify the concept of meaning, by investigating:

the connections between meaning and a host of other notions, including appropriate notions of choicelessness, determination, truth, and capacity. All these notions are interdependent. In particular, the notions that Wittgenstein takes to be part of the conditions of intelligibility of meaning have meaning as part of their own conditions of intelligibility. We are here dealing, we might say, with a distinctive metaphysical layer of reality, which is thoroughly coloured with meaning and intentionality. Meaning becomes visible, in all its ordinariness and unmysteriousness, when we attend to the place that it occupies within that layer of reality. (p. 183, emphasis in original)

In ‘What Is Meaning? A Wittgensteinian Answer to an Un-Wittgensteinian Question’, Hans-Johann Glock pursues one way of fleshing out Bronzo’s concluding vision of meaning’s place in our lives. Glock explores the idea that we can give a connective use-theory of meaning, one that draws on Wittgenstein’s reflections on meaning to elucidate ‘its connections with other concepts like those of rule, explanation, and understanding’ (p. 187). Glock begins by offering a critique of ‘Wittgensteinian strategies for evading an investigation of the concept of meaning’ and then advocates the program of giving an ‘analysis of “meaning” and of related terms [that] conforms to the way in which they are used, explained, and understood by competent speakers’ (p. 193). However, he argues that because ‘there are incontestable differences between the way we use “meaning of a word” and the way in which we use “correct way of using a word”’ (p. 196), meaning and overall linguistic use cannot be simply identified. Instead, he proposes, ‘rule-guided use determines meaning, rather than being identical with it. A difference in meaning entails a difference in use, not vice versa’ (p. 196). This leads into an examination of the question of which aspects of our rule-guided practices are relevant to meaning, and to the conclusion that ‘all explanations of meaning eventually move in a circle’ (p. 207). Making a virtue of necessity, Glock proposes that the right kind of circle, one that makes the appropriate connections, is just what we need: ‘It is not circles as such that vitiate an explanation of meaning, but only those that are too narrow or unilluminating’ (p. 207, emphasis in original). He concludes by offering just such an account in terms of knowledge and mastery of rules that specify conditions that must be fulfilled for an expression in a language to be applied by a speaker and responded to by hearers.
Like Bronzo and Glock’s essays, William Child’s essay on ‘Meaning, Use, and Supervenience’ starts out from the observation that Wittgenstein was an anti-reductionist about meaning and intentional content and the conviction that Wittgenstein was right to hold that facts about meaning cannot be reduced to facts about use characterized in wholly non-semantic, non-intentional terms. All three authors acknowledge that Wittgenstein was opposed to the project of providing a general theory of meaning, yet they also recognize that he did have some positive and non-pleonastic things to say about the use of words and their meaning. Glock shows that, despite Wittgenstein’s rejection of philosophical theorizing, it is possible to marshal Wittgenstein’s piecemeal observations about meaning and use as raw material for the construction of a non-reductive theory of meaning. Child, however, draws our attention to the ‘interesting and nonpleonastic things’ that Wittgenstein has to say ‘about what it takes for an expression to be used with a particular meaning, including things about the relation between a word’s meaning what it does and facts about its use, characterized in non-semantic terms’ (p. 212).

In particular, Child highlights two points. First, the importance of Wittgenstein’s conviction that ‘the existence of a custom or practice of following rules requires there to be a whole pattern of rule-involving activity’ (p. 213) and that this ‘structure of holistically related activities … provides the necessary background for something to count as an instance of rule-following’ (p. 214). Second, it is characteristic of Wittgenstein’s approach that he focuses ‘on the procedure of someone’s learning to follow a rule’ (p. 214, emphasis in original). Child then provides a thorough defence of the picture that emerges from these observations in terms of supervenience: while facts about meaning cannot be reduced to non-semantic facts about use, they do supervene on such facts.

Taken together, the first eleven essays in the volume make a very strong case for Wittgenstein’s continuing relevance for contemporary analytic philosophy, thus delivering on the editors’ stated aim of repairing the disconnection of the analytic tradition from one of its founders. As we have seen, the contributors succeed in bringing central themes in Wittgenstein’s later writings into dialogue with current debates. However, it’s only when one turns to the final chapter, James Conant’s ‘Some Socratic Aspects of Wittgenstein’s Conception of Philosophy’, that we finally find an essay that focusses on the reasons for this disconnection. For one aim of his essay is to show that there is ‘something altogether misleading about a certain widely disseminated caricature of Wittgenstein’, namely that he is a ‘particularly pure incarnation of the anti-philosopher’ (p. 249). While the rest of the collection can be seen as an oblique response to this charge—the papers that make up this book, and the Wittgenstein presented in the previous chapters, would fit in comfortably at a meeting of the APA, or a joint session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association—Conant’s essay engages with it directly.
The first section of Conant’s essay takes the form of an exam consisting of about three dozen quotations. Readers are told that there is ‘no point in reading this text if you are not willing to take the exam yourself’ (p. 231) and are asked to tell whether the quotations are from, or about, Socrates, or Wittgenstein. In the spirit of the opening instructions, I should say that while I missed a few questions on the practice test, I did get all of the questions on the exam proper right. However, that wasn’t because I was able to identify the differences between the quoted views—one point of the exercise is that there aren’t any—but because I could usually remember where I’d seen them before. The key to the exam, and the ensuing discussion, is already intimated in the chapter’s title. In other words, it is equally true of both Socrates and Wittgenstein that:

in order to understand the philosopher, we need a way of understanding the relation between his philosophy and his life that allows us to see that life as something internally related to his philosophy—the life as an expression of his philosophy and his way of philosophizing as an expression of his conception of how to live. (p. 243, emphasis in original)

This Socratic conception of philosophy, on which life and philosophy are inextricably connected, Conant observes, is both what accounts for Wittgenstein’s distance from, and disdain for, contemporary academic philosophy, and his ‘claim to be the true inheritor of the most fundamental aspirations of the tradition’ (p. 256). Consequently, Wittgenstein’s ‘Socratic remarks’ about the connection between life and philosophy, such as ‘“The revolutionary will be the one who can revolutionize himself”’ (p. 250), play an important role in his writing, precisely because they interrupt ‘the investigation in order to step back for a moment and comment on a difficulty in doing philosophy which one runs up against in such investigations’ (p. 251). However, this emphasis on the tension between Wittgenstein’s own conception of philosophy and current philosophical practice in the final chapter should not be taken to imply that we have to choose between being authentic but irrelevant and being relevant but inauthentic, as some Wittgensteinians inspired by Wittgenstein’s ‘Socratic remarks’ seem to think: the best essays in this collection are both authentically concerned with how we should live and relevant to contemporary philosophy.