

WHAT IS A WORK BY WITTGENSTEIN? | JOACHIM SCHULTE

1. The Wittgenstein editions

At first glance the question “What is a work by Wittgenstein?” may seem strange. After all, if someone asked “What is a work by Plato?” or “What is a work by Kant?” one would reply by simply listing Plato’s dialogues or Kant’s *Critiques* as well as the *Metaphysik der Sitten*, the *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe* etc. etc. In Wittgenstein’s case matters are quite different. And they are different for the simple reason that during his lifetime Wittgenstein, although a prolific writer, published only one very short philosophical book: his famous *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*), mostly written at the time he was serving as a soldier in the first world war. All other books published under Wittgenstein’s name were posthumously edited by the heirs of his literary *Nachlass* (G.E.M. Anscombe, Rush Rhees and Georg Henrik von Wright).¹

Had Wittgenstein left a number of typescripts or manuscripts clearly identifiable as treatises on this or that philosophical topic, the question what to count as one of his works would have been easy to answer. But that was not the situation Wittgenstein’s trustees were confronted with after his death. What they found was a large number of notebooks of various sizes, a comparable number of typescripts (top copies as well as carbon copies), folders and boxes filled with cuttings from typescripts and a few transcripts of

1. On the posthumous publications see further Anthony Kenny’s article in this volume.

A. Pichler, S. Säätelä (eds.), *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works*, pp. 397–404, Frankfurt a.M.: ontos verlag 2006, © ontos verlag, Joachim Schulte.

dictations by Wittgenstein. The total number of pages is nearly 20,000, and it is clear that identifying and classifying all the individual items would have involved reading a considerable quantity of material. Fortunately, in the early stages of their labours the trustees did not have to study closely the entire bulk of Wittgenstein's papers. They knew of, and in some cases had even read during Wittgenstein's lifetime, some of his writings they felt sure he would have liked to see published. And reasonably enough, they decided to begin the series of posthumous "books by Wittgenstein" with these writings.

Among these writings one typescript stood out and was the first of a long sequence of books brought out under Wittgenstein's name. This was *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), and the universally positive echo found by this publication apparently confirmed the correctness of the decision to acquaint the world with this text. Not all of the following books (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* 1956, *Blue and Brown Books* 1958, *Notebooks 1914–1916* 1961, *Philosophische Bemerkungen* 1964, *Zettel* 1967, *Philosophische Grammatik* 1969, *On Certainty* 1969, etc.) published under Wittgenstein's name, however, were greeted with the same degree of acclaim. At first most of the grumbling that became audible amid a good deal of applause was directed at the author, but after a while some people started wondering whether it had been a wise decision on the editors' part to publish these particular texts or to do so in the particular form they had chosen.

Of course, to answer this sort of question one needs to know something about the manuscripts or typescripts involved as well as the difficulties presented by the writings in question. In the present context, the best I can do is give a very brief sketch of the general situation of Wittgenstein's papers. By far the greatest part of these papers is kept by the Wren Library of Trinity College, Cambridge; a much smaller number can be found in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna; a few items are in the possession of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and the Bertrand Russell Archive, Hamilton (Ontario, Canada). In 1967 a microfilm of most of the papers was produced and made available to scholars working in those libraries that had purchased copies of the film. At around the time when Cornell University published this microfilm, G.H. von Wright brought out his catalogue of Wittgenstein's papers, which in its most recent form lists 82 manuscripts, 45 typescripts

and 11 dictations.² This catalogue has been the basis of all further work on Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*.

A few years ago the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen produced an electronic edition of Wittgenstein's papers, comprising not only facsimiles of practically the entire *Nachlass* but also two types of transcriptions of the whole corpus – a diplomatic and a normalized version. In the meantime, several volumes of the so-called *Wiener Ausgabe* of Wittgenstein's writings from the period 1929–1933 have appeared and give easy access to some of the manuscripts of that period.

So today readers are in an incomparably better position than they were a few years ago to judge for themselves whether the decisions taken by Wittgenstein's editors have mostly been wise ones. But making good use of this favourable position is not an easy matter. Of course, once you have located a certain passage in the relevant manuscript, you can easily compare it with the published text and see if the editor got it right. In most cases he will have got it right, and in a few other cases he will have made a mistake. But this is not the real sort of problem that worries most of those who criticize existing editions of Wittgenstein's writings. What worries these people is one or other of the following two questions:

- (1) Are these editions sufficiently scholarly in the sense of giving ample information on peculiarities of the text, variant formulations, dates of composition, probable connections with other writings, etc.?
- (2) Don't these editions do great harm to the true text composed by Wittgenstein, which is an interconnected whole that cannot be subdivided into individual chunks called "Wittgenstein's works"? Isn't it true that the totality of Wittgenstein's writings forms his one and only work and that every attempt at slicing it up into separate "works" would badly distort our picture of Wittgenstein's real achievement?

2. G.H. von Wright, "The Wittgenstein Papers", in *The Philosophical Review* 78, pp. 483–503 (Ithaca 1969); latest revised version in James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions*, Hackett: Indianapolis and Cambridge, MA, 1993, pp. 480–506.

I think it can be shown that question (1) is a serious and helpful one. Pursuing it may lead to fruitful insights likely to result in more reliable editions as well as in more perceptive and convincing interpretations. Question (2), on the other hand, seems to me completely misguided. Probably it is inspired by certain defensible observations regarding the nature of Wittgenstein's writings which then, however, are assembled to form an utterly biased and misleading picture. To see what inspires this type of question and why it should be rejected we need more information on Wittgenstein's way of writing and the shape of his manuscripts and typescripts.

2. Wittgenstein's way of working

The vast majority of Wittgenstein's extant manuscript writings exists in the form of notebooks or ledgers. In many cases the difference in size between small notebooks and large ledgers is indicative of a difference in use: the notebooks tend to contain brief remarks, jottings, fragments of sentences, compressed reminders. A sizable portion of this material was then used as a basis for the remarks Wittgenstein wrote down in his ledgers, which sometimes (but by no means always) have the character of fair copies. Both notebooks and ledgers can give the impression of being records of what went on in Wittgenstein's mind – sometimes you literally see him think.

A particularly striking part of Wittgenstein's manuscripts is formed by two series of ledgers (*Bände* I–XVIII, 1929–1940, and MSS 130–138 [comprising *Bände* Q, R, S] containing practically all his late remarks on the philosophy of psychology, 1946–1949). Some of the notebooks contain notes for lectures or dictations, and these are among the relatively few philosophical pages by Wittgenstein written in English.

The greater part of the extant typescripts was dictated by Wittgenstein; at most a very small number was presumably copied by a typist from manuscripts prepared by the author. Wittgenstein's typical way of proceeding was as follows. After he had filled several of his ledgers he went through this handwritten material and marked those paragraphs he wanted to make further use of. These paragraphs were then dictated to a typist, normally in the same order in which they occur in the manuscripts. This sort of typescript would then form an extract from the manuscript(s) used for dictation. In a number of cases Wittgenstein would then find the time to revise and cut up

one copy of the typescript and rearrange these fragments in a new order which he found more satisfying.

To take an example. The first ledgers (*Bände*) filled after Wittgenstein's return to Cambridge in January 1929 were used in the spring of 1930 to dictate a typescript (TS 208) which was then cut into small fragments and rearranged as TS 209 (published as *Philosophische Bemerkungen – Philosophical Remarks*). The rearrangement, however, was handed over to Russell, and Wittgenstein never made further use of it, whereas a second copy of the earlier TS 208 was (together with two additional typescripts) used as the basis for another, very comprehensive rearrangement (TS 212), which in its turn served as the basis for a new typescript (TS 213 – the so-called “Big Typescript”, 1933). In the following years the Big Typescript was revised, rearranged and partially used in other contexts, so that a number of remarks from it found their way into the last typescript (ca. 1946) of *Philosophical Investigations*, for instance.

This characteristic way of working was possible only because of what one might call Wittgenstein's *Bemerkungen* style of writing. Throughout his life he wrote down his ideas in the form of fairly short remarks rarely covering more than half a page and only exceptionally extending beyond a full page. These remarks, however, are not “aphorisms” in the style of Nietzsche, Karl Kraus or Lichtenberg. That is, in spite of a certain degree of separateness from their context they are never wholly, and often not at all, independent of the remarks surrounding them: they are succinct but not self-contained. This fact often contributes to the difficulties readers encounter when trying to understand the full sense of individual remarks in their original context, where it may well happen that no thread connecting Wittgenstein's thoughts is recognizable. And time and again it appears a miracle that in their – frequently completely different – later typescript contexts the same remarks strike readers as organic parts of extended arguments and as highly illuminating.

This shows, first, that at least when it came to revising his earliest manuscript versions Wittgenstein must have had fairly clear, complex and changing notions of his overall project in mind; and, second, that an enormous amount of work must have gone into rearranging his material in accordance with his latest conception of what he was trying to achieve.

3. What is a work by Wittgenstein?

The significance of these two points has rarely been fully appreciated. But it is these two points that lend particular importance and urgency to the question what to count as a work by Wittgenstein. Confronted with the prodigious bulk and apparent impenetrability of Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*, an increasing number of readers have gained the impression that only the entirety of Wittgenstein's papers can properly be regarded as his "work" – his *one work*. These readers like to speak of the "interconnected" structure and the complex "network" formed by the totality of Wittgenstein's remarks; they are prone to use the notion of "hypertext"; and some of them have compared the totality of Wittgenstein's remarks with a musical score assembled by putting together different "parts". (See above, question (2).) But those who are familiar with the details of Wittgenstein's working process and have a clear understanding of our two points about his *Bemerkungen* style know that this response of regarding the whole *Nachlass* as one complex work is on the wrong track. To grasp this it is sufficient to remember that it is possible and important to distinguish between different attempts at writing a work and between different projects Wittgenstein had in mind when composing his manuscripts.

To find out whether a certain manuscript or typescript is to count as a "work" by Wittgenstein one should try to establish whether

- (a) the author himself thought that the text in question formed a more or less organic whole displaying a satisfactory relation between form and content;
- (b) whether we as readers can detect a line of argument with theses, supporting reasons, objections, examples, etc.;
- (c) whether the text has undergone a certain amount of stylistic polishing and rearranging of individual remarks showing that there has been some improvement in the direction of enhanced readability and intelligibility.

These criteria (a) to (c) are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for a text's counting as a *work*. They are rules of thumb that can serve their purpose only if they are applied by someone with a good deal of experience and a clear question in mind.

A rough idea of how these criteria can be used may be got by looking at *Philosophical Investigations*, which from a genetical point of view can be divided into three sections [(I): §§ 1–188, (II): §§ 189–421, (III): §§ 422–693]. All three sections clearly satisfy criterion (c). Section (III), however, poses greater difficulties than the other sections as regards criterion (b). Sometimes it is next to impossible to identify a line of argument, and at some points one wonders if there was *meant* to be a recognizable argument at all. So this section may be treated as different from the other ones – and from a certain perspective perhaps even as inferior in this respect. In the case of section (I) there is very good evidence for seeing criterion (a) as fulfilled: this section survived several stages of revision in nearly unchanged form, so we may safely presume that Wittgenstein was as satisfied with this material as he ever came to feeling satisfied with anything he wrote. With respect to section (II) there is no comparably conclusive evidence for thinking that Wittgenstein would not have wanted to make radical changes had he had sufficient time. But this on the other hand is compensated by the fact that most readers will agree that in point of criterion (b) large stretches of section (II) are a marvellous achievement – at least on a par with section (I).

These considerations are not meant to show that we should be in doubt about the status of the *Investigations* as a work by Wittgenstein. But they do serve to point out that the status of distinguishable parts of the book can be seen to differ. At the same time we understand (if we want to understand) that no other manuscript or typescript from Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* can compete with *Philosophical Investigations* as regards fulfilment of all three criteria. And as these criteria allow some approximate kind of ranking along three axes, they can be useful instruments in the hands of those who read Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* with sufficient understanding. Paying attention to these points will also help to give a clearer idea of what kind of project Wittgenstein was pursuing at a given time. And having a clear idea of his project can, in its turn, often contribute to a more profitable application of our three criteria.

If asked “Which texts from Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* may be counted as *works*?”, application of these criteria soon shows that, except for *Philosophical Investigations*, very little comes near that status. In all likelihood it would also lead us to the conclusion that the published texts fulfil our criteria to a higher degree than most of the unpublished manuscripts or typescripts. Pre-

sumably the most puzzling case of all is Wittgenstein's last series of manuscripts, which has been published under the title “*On Certainty*”. In this case, criteria (a) and (c) are clearly not satisfied at all. Criterion (b), however, which requires us as readers to be able to find a line of argument, an interesting ensemble of questions, objections and replies may lead us to think very highly of this book. And perhaps this serves to indicate that among these criteria (b) is the most important – even if it falls short of showing that books are composed, not by their authors, but by their readers.³

3. As regards the literature on this sort of question, some of the papers in G.H. von Wright's book *Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982) are an absolute must, even if in part they are not quite up to date any more. Another essential book is Brian McGuinness, *Approaches to Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge, 2002. For more on the specific questions raised in this contribution, see Alois Pichler, *Wittgensteins Philosophische Untersuchungen: Vom Buch zum Album*, Amsterdam-New York (NY): Rodopi, 2004; Josef G.F. Rothhaupt, *Farbthemen in Wittgensteins Gesamtnachlaß*, Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum, 1996; Joachim Schulte, introduction to the genetical-critical edition of Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2001; *Wittgenstein: Eine Einführung*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1989, chapter 1, § 3 (English translation by W.H. Brenner and J.F. Holley, *Wittgenstein: An Introduction*, Albany (NY): State University of New York Press, 1992); “What Wittgenstein Wrote”, in Rosaria Egidi, *In Search of a New Humanism*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999, pp. 79–91; David Stern, “The Availability of Wittgenstein's Philosophy”, in Hans Sluga and David Stern (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996, pp. 442–476.