

Resenha

Book Review

BONCOMPAGNI, Anna. *Wittgenstein. Lo sguardo e il limite*, Milano: Mimesis, 2012, 216 p.

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Inquiring the themes of looking and vision in Wittgenstein, perhaps one among the most challenging ways of engaging his philosophical work, means taking issue with some of the most nagging and puzzling topics of the scholarship on the Austrian genius. As it is in fact clear for whoever ventured in the complexity of Wittgenstein's investigations over the several understanding and possible usages of language, and in particular of the grammatical—in Wittgenstein's sense—categories of saying, speaking and showing, to use Boncompagni's chapter nomenclature, means measuring with the core issues and problems with which Wittgenstein himself struggled for his whole philosophical journey, and which widely marked the diverse interpretations of his views. If the topics tackled thus hit nothing short of the core of Wittgenstein's thought, the author assists the readers—both the newcomers and the navigated ones—by tracing a path into such intricacies, helping them to orientate themselves in the multitude of distinctions and nuances characterizing the various phases of his reflection on such topics. From the very start the voice of the author is steady, and the directions indicated clear, so that what at a first glance could appear as a desperate mission works rather as a congenial venture. Despite the density of the material covered, the reading of the book is accompanied by the feeling that each stage of the progress is well prepared and properly spelled out. This tidiness helps the reader to cover, with the author, a lot of road, ranging an impressive number of philosophical matters. As in fact the author stresses in the introductory chapter, what is covered in the book is one singular aspect, or better I would say the *insistence* on one singular aspect, of Wittgenstein's thought in order to cast light on his whole philosophy (p. 15), and more precisely on Wittgenstein's method and general philosophical sensibility. Whether this breadth is vindicated and thus the goal achieved is a matter that each reader should evaluate by studying the book. What I shall do is to present the main turns of the eyed path, and sketch a few comments myself. The task is not an easy one, so let's proceed in steps.

The three central chapters, enclosed in a quick but efficacious introduction and a perspicuous conclusion wrapping up the much argued in them, are dedicated as said to the three macro-concepts of “saying”, “speaking”, and “showing”, which respectively express as many ways of looking at, and trying to make sense of, the pervasive character of language and its burdens. The author links from the very

beginning this investigation *on* language and on *our* ways of understanding/using it with the inquiry of the wider conception *of* philosophical work implicit in such investigation. Boncompagni intertwines the various Wittgensteinian digressions on the ways in which we reflect on the very nature of language in the context of the various metaphysical and epistemological issues we encounter in such investigation, with his peculiar shifts in the conception of philosophical activity related to such wanderings. The author links all these themes and aspects together through the notion of “vision”, without however pretending to reduce such great variety under a single, univocal and ready-made category. It is in fact one of the chief aspirations of the book that of showing the diverse movements and directions that Wittgenstein’s thought undertook in the investigation of the ways language works, and of the ways in which its working—that is always, *also* in the *Tractatus*, *our* way of making it work—influences our philosophical vision and sense of limit. Such concepts took at each turn slightly different acceptations, of which it is interesting to ask the consistency and the purported promising character.

All these ideas form each time a cluster of concepts of which it is philosophically interesting to see its working in the various eventualities of our ordinary and intellectual practices. Boncompagni re-reads the main writings of Wittgenstein, and thus the by-now canonical distinction of his thought into phases—four *at least*—, in the light of his understanding and usage of such diverse clusters, finding out both some common themes in his work and some important adjustments or change of emphasis, thus problematicizing some inveterate habits of interpretation of his philosophy. While the continuities regard the consistency in the emphasis on the importance of seeing and noticing—and of acquiring new ways of seeing and noticing—in philosophical thinking, the variations consist in the different ways in which such activities are described by Wittgenstein as perspicuous ones. In this light Boncompagni re-reads the meta-philosophy of the *Tractatus* by taking issues with those who variously accepted, challenged or refused a thick and substantial ontology and philosophy of language in the text. A similar operation is conducted on the *Investigations* for what regards the issue of the alleged realist, anti-realist or quietist turn in this later stage of his thinking, especially for what regards again the theme of language and its anchorage to the world. Finally, a series of other works—in particular his writings on the philosophy of psychology and of mathematics—is assessed in order to address the various interpretations of Wittgenstein’s seminal remarks and arguments on aspect-seeing, philosophical grammar and rule-following. As the author convincingly shows, what is important to notice, at loss of misunderstanding and impoverishing his reflections, is that it is not only possible but also recommendable to detect the presence, even if in different degrees and with different emphases, of the three activities of saying, speaking and showing in all these moments of Wittgenstein’s production. It would be impossible in the space of a review to cover and discuss this huge amount of material without examining each line enforcing the dialectic of the book, and yet I would like to comment on a few aspects, both general and particular, that I think are especially worthwhile noticing and stressing.

The first point I would like to remark is the ways in which Boncompagni’s interpretative key congenially tackles and spells out the issue of the irreducible character of philosophical reflection with respect to scientific inquiry (see, for example, p. 56-63). It goes without saying that this is one of the themes that any

serious reader of Wittgenstein cannot avoid to notice and take issues with. By a compelling characterization of Wittgenstein's several incursions into, and exploration of, the concepts of vision and looking, Boncompagni shows how at each time of such reflection what is suggested is the adoption—sometimes immediate, sometimes imaginative—of a posture and attitude toward language and our life with words, that is very unlike the ones that we might assume when investigating them from a purely descriptive, that is scientific, viewpoint and stance. It is important to notice how this operation is not accomplished at the cost of postulating any metaphysical realm and extra-empirical horizon against which our practices of meaning would make sense. The normativity of language is in fact at the same time subtracted from any foundational rhetoric of justification, and anchored on our transcendental capacities and ways of being in the world. The progress from the tractarian understanding of language as a mainly assertive device to the most elaborated and multi-faced ones sketched in Wittgenstein's later writings would thus represent an enlargement—that is at the same time a philosophical enrichment—of the understanding of such capacities and ways of being; that is, a recognition of the wider framework of interests and scopes featuring our human practices of expression and communication. The merely descriptive of scientific inquiry is thus progressively eroded by a philosophical, that is the reflective, survey of the various ways in which we practically inscribe our meaningful activities in the world.

This is *in this sense* a kind of transcendental move since it tries to recognize not the sheer empirical or metaphysical limits, but rather the very *conditions* and *possibilities* of limit as the horizon against which our practices, *as they constantly grow*, can be understood and assessed. As the author doesn't fail to notice, this whole apparatus set in place by Wittgenstein is meant to address some most dangerous ordinary and intellectual vices that he saw haunting our ways of understanding the working of language—as for example in the case of the description (vs. expression) of our “internal”, or of the mastery of a rule. Boncompagni stresses how in each of those cases Wittgenstein, by remarking our essential linguistic nature understood in terms of the thoroughly intentional and normative statute of our ways of speaking and behaving, is interested in resisting those potentially threatening assumptions and pictures of our encounters with the world and of our relationship with ourselves as well. Wittgenstein carefully and painstakingly surveyed such prejudices and the difficulties that their acceptance imply, and the author follows the central passages of such progress, spending some of the best pages of the volume in showing the critical passage—often not adequately accounted in the literature—from the understanding of meaning in terms of use in the *Investigations* to the conception of grammatical expressions as best analyzed in *On Certainty*, whose presence can be appreciated also in the material published as the *Philosophical Observations*.

Another connected theme is that of the alleged phenomenological and pragmatist dimension of some of Wittgenstein's views, especially those regarding the passage from the picture-theory of naming and speaking (or seemingly so, given that, as the author convincingly argues, Wittgenstein would debunk the saying/showing dichotomy altogether) to a most engaging one in which such activities are depicted as *expressive* of our own point of view and overall reaction toward a certain situation. Boncompagni discusses Wittgenstein's observations from the late nineteenth-twenties and early thirties about the lived experience that we convey *through* language, and

which is intrinsically intertwined *with* language. Against those who downsize the importance and the very presence of such considerations in his work, the author shows how Wittgenstein progressively employed a phenomenological language in his discussion of the ways in which language works and of the kind of stance we ought to assume toward our utterances (p. 42 ff). A stance that in his later writings on psychology and certainty expressively endorsed a pragmatist register, this time related to the kind of understanding that we are ready to grant to certain beliefs about ourselves (as in the cases of first-personal psychological reports) or the world (as in the cases of determinate statements about reality) as they are experienced in our ways of world-making (p. 96ff).

Here comes to the fore again the distinctive therapeutic, and I would add transformative, dimension of Wittgenstein's understanding of philosophical activity itself that the author already introduced (p. 116ff). Philosophy has to do once again with an *education* of one's vision, and an *adjustment* to a focus that is more compelling and adequate for the description of our variegated practices of meaning. This I take as one of the most important teachings of Wittgenstein, and the author is very skilful in depicting not only how this philosophical machinery is in place in his latter writings, but also its presence and persistence in Wittgenstein's whole philosophical investigations. Despite the author's clever reconstruction, I am worried by a certain use of rightness (e.g. "right vision", p. 121-2), appropriateness (e.g. "appropriate reaction", p. 86), and other similar notions: it is in fact not completely clear where the author stands with respect to the philosophical characterization of such notions in Wittgenstein, a topic much discussed in the literature. It seems that at times she reads Wittgenstein as a naturalist about the facts—or at least *some* general facts—of human nature, conceptually described but, at the same time, widely shared species-wise, close in this way both to the Strawsonian reading and to the (very different) one of the Swansea School, while at others more as a pragmatist thinker who individuates in usefulness and productivity the only open criteria of the justification and normative weight of our conceptions and of the human features they voice and stand for. The choice between the two interpretative lines is of the utmost importance, especially for the understanding of the very nature of vision and its possibilities of being trained in relation to the therapeutic aims of philosophical activity offered by Wittgenstein. How should we characterize the "rightness" and "appropriateness" of our ways of talking and seeing? Which are their (philosophical) criteria? And how do we read Wittgenstein's claim for a return to the ordinary ground of our language and experience? In the book I see at times an ambiguity with regard to interpretative strategies the author endorses, an issue that would be interesting to investigate at more depth, perhaps in a later project.

As a final evaluation, the security and tidiness with which the author proceeds, surely a mark of originality and scholarship, pay at times some due to a more exhaustive discussion of the literature, as for example in the discussion of the thorny issue of the nature and place of value in Wittgenstein's philosophy, on which the literature harshly quarreled especially after the *resolute reading* came to the fore in the late eighties (p. 178ff). These occasional misgivings might cause some twists of nose to the hard-core specialists—and we all know how picky Wittgenstein scholars can be. But Boncompagni is brave enough to venture in such narrow territories by slicing through the virtually countless interpretations of the central aspects of

Wittgenstein's philosophy that she discusses, and that alone is a sign of confidence that pays off once trusted and followed. Writing an English review of an Italian book for mostly Portuguese speakers is thus justified by the fine craftsmanship of the item, which Wittgenstein scholars, and especially the ones with a strong interest in pragmatism frequenting this journal, should not dodge from reading. The author, also an acquaintance of the journal, recently wrote two companion pieces in English on the pragmatist legacy in Wittgenstein that deepen respectively the topics of common sense and that of grammatical expressions treated in the book, helping us to advance a further bit our understanding of such complex and fascinating figure of our philosophical culture.

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