

Cambridge University Press

0521532604 - Wittgenstein Reads Weininger - Edited by David G. Stern and Bela Szabados

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Reading Wittgenstein (on) Reading

An Introduction

David G. Stern and Béla Szabados

Wittgenstein's Influences

In 1931, Ludwig Wittgenstein included Otto Weininger on a list he made of ten writers who had influenced him. He wrote:

I think there is some truth in my idea that I am really only reproductive in my thinking. I think I have never *invented* a line of thinking but that it was always provided for me by someone else & I have done no more than passionately take it up for my work of clarification. That is how Boltzmann Hertz Schopenhauer Frege, Russell, Kraus, Loos Weininger Spengler, Sraffa have influenced me.¹

The list appears to be arranged according to the chronological order in which they influenced Wittgenstein. One sign of this is the odd punctuation of the list, which is due to the fact that Wittgenstein first wrote just four names – “Frege, Russell, Spengler, Sraffa” – and added the other names, carefully arranged in order, above the line. The first three names are authors Wittgenstein read as a teenager; Frege and Russell first had an impact on him when he was in his early twenties. While Wittgenstein would certainly have known of Kraus and Weininger long before 1914, for both were famous and controversial in fin-de-siècle Vienna, their position on the list, and the fact that Kraus, Loos and Weininger all had an influence on the *Tractatus*, which was composed during the First World War, suggests that their influence should be dated to the war years, or immediately before. All three were important influences on Paul Engelmann and his friends in Olmütz with

Cambridge University Press

0521532604 - Wittgenstein Reads Weininger - Edited by David G. Stern and Bela Szabados

Excerpt

[More information](#)

whom Wittgenstein stayed during an extended leave in the summer of 1916. Spengler's influence would have been after the publication of *The Decline of the West*, in 1918, while Wittgenstein first met Sraffa after returning to Cambridge in 1929. In most cases, while the precise nature of the influence is certainly debatable, the overall character is not.

In the case of Otto Weininger, however, we have very little firm evidence as to how he influenced Wittgenstein, or why. We do know that Wittgenstein read Weininger during the First World War, that he still thought highly of his writing late in life, and that, in the early 1930s, he repeatedly recommended reading Weininger to his friends and students. Desmond Lee, in a piece on Wittgenstein in 1929–31, writes that

He had a great admiration for Weininger's *Sex and Character* and for the introduction to Hertz's *Mechanics*. Both of these he made me read, and I remember his annoyance at finding that the Weininger book was in a section of the University Library which required a special procedure for borrowing: he thought the implication was that it was in some way unfit for undergraduates and that that was nonsense.²

Around the same time, Wittgenstein recommended *Sex and Character* to G. E. Moore. In response to Moore's lack of sympathy for the book, Wittgenstein wrote:

Thanks for your letter. I can quite imagine that you don't admire Weininger very much what with that beastly translation and the fact that W. must feel very foreign to you. It is true that he is fantastic but he is *great* and fantastic. It isn't necessary or rather not possible to agree with him but the greatness lies in that with which we disagree. It is his enormous mistake which is great. I.e. roughly speaking if you just add a "~" to the whole book it says an important truth. However we better talk about it when I come back.³

However, Wittgenstein's letter does not further explain what he means by adding a negation sign to the whole book, or identify what he takes to be the "important truth" that emerges. Even if we include the passage quoted at the beginning, there are only a handful of additional references to Weininger in the Wittgenstein papers, and they do not, at first sight, cast much additional light on the nature of Weininger's significance for Wittgenstein.⁴

The first author to refer to the importance of Weininger for Wittgenstein was Georg Henrik von Wright,⁵ who was also, as editor, responsible for the inclusion of our opening passage about Wittgenstein's influences in *Culture and Value*, first published in 1977. That book is, as he puts it, a selection from the numerous notes in Wittgenstein's manuscript material that "do not belong directly with his philosophical works although they are scattered amongst the philosophical texts. Some of these notes are autobiographical, some are about the nature of philosophical activity, and some concern subjects of a general sort, such as questions about art or about religion."⁶ There are also repeated discussions of Wittgenstein's reading, and he refers to a much wider range of authors than he does in the *Philosophical Investigations* or *Tractatus*. For instance, the index of names includes Francis Bacon, Karl Barth, Ludwig Boltzmann, Josef Breuer, John Bunyan and Wilhelm Busch among the B's, Immanuel Kant, Gottfried Keller, Søren Kierkegaard, Heinrich von Kleist and Karl Kraus among the K's.

Von Wright's brief but helpful remarks on Wittgenstein's reading divide the writers he read into two groups. The first consists of philosophers in the narrow sense, the great figures in the history of philosophy. Here, Wittgenstein was not a "learned man":

Wittgenstein had done no systematic reading in the classics of philosophy. He could read only what he could wholeheartedly assimilate. We have seen that as a young man he read Schopenhauer. From Spinoza, Hume, and Kant he said that he could get only glimpses of understanding. . . . it is significant that he did read, and enjoy, Plato. He must have recognized congenial features, both in Plato's literary and philosophical method and in the temperament behind the thoughts.⁷

This summary of Wittgenstein's views about the canonical philosophers finds some corroboration and qualification in Drury's records of conversations with Wittgenstein, which also allow us to add some names to this list: Kant and Berkeley are described as "deep," Leibniz as a "great man" well worth studying, and there are also references to Hegel and Marx.⁸ Another canonical figure on Wittgenstein's reading list was William James. He thought very highly of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and devoted so much time to the *Principles of Psychology* during the second half of the 1940s that he seriously considered using it as a text in one of his classes.⁹

Cambridge University Press

0521532604 - Wittgenstein Reads Weininger - Edited by David G. Stern and Bela Szabados

Excerpt

[More information](#)

On a number of occasions, Wittgenstein seems to have almost made a point of bragging about his lack of reading in the history of philosophy, or his lack of respect for the work of other philosophers. Thus we come across reports of comments to Drury and Leavis that seem to uneasily combine self-deprecation, humor and arrogance, and perhaps betray a certain anxiety. Consider the following recollections of discussions with Wittgenstein:

Drury: Did you ever read anything of Aristotle's?

Wittgenstein: Here I am, a one-time professor of philosophy who has never read a word of Aristotle!¹⁰

[F. R. Leavis:] I was walking once with Wittgenstein when I was moved, by something he said, to remark, with a suggestion of innocent enquiry in my tone: "You don't think much of most other philosophers, Wittgenstein?" "No."¹¹

The setting of these two exchanges might well have been partly responsible for the tone of Wittgenstein's responses. In the first, from Drury's notes on a conversation on an afternoon in Phoenix Park, Dublin, in the autumn of 1948, Drury had already quizzed him about the history of philosophy at some length, including Plato, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Schopenhauer; in the second exchange, it is evident that there was considerable mutual mistrust between Wittgenstein and Leavis.¹²

On other occasions, Wittgenstein expressed a very different attitude:

Drury: "I sometimes regret the amount of time I spent in reading the great historical philosophers, at a time when I couldn't understand them."

Wittgenstein: "I don't regret that you did all that reading."¹³

Wittgenstein: "I have been wondering what title to give my book. I have thought of something like 'Philosophical Remarks.'"

Drury: "Why not just call it 'Philosophy'?"

Wittgenstein: (angrily) "Don't be such a complete ass – how could I use a word that has meant so much in the history of mankind. As if my work wasn't only a small fragment of philosophy."¹⁴

These remarks indicate, in a more congenial setting, a respectful attitude toward reading the great philosophers, and considerably more humility toward the philosophical tradition. At the same time, it is clear that Wittgenstein preferred to read relatively little but very closely, frequently returning to the books he knew best.

Cambridge University Press

0521532604 - Wittgenstein Reads Weininger - Edited by David G. Stern and Bela Szabados

Excerpt

[More information](#)

If philosophy were a cultural constant, then certain philosophical writings could be regarded as compulsory, regardless of the reader's time and place. But philosophy was not like that for Wittgenstein; as von Wright stresses, Wittgenstein was "much more 'history-conscious' than is commonly recognized and understood," and did not regard philosophy as a

"historical constant", any more than science is, or art... His way of seeing philosophy was not an attempt to tell us what philosophy, once and for all, is, but expressed what for him, in the setting of his times, it had to be.¹⁵

Wittgenstein recommended books to his friends and students from which he thought they could benefit, taking into account their circumstances and problems:

"It may be that you ought not to read Kierkegaard. I couldn't read him now. Kierkegaard is so long winded; he keeps on saying the same thing over and over again. I want to say, 'Oh, all right, all right – I agree, but please get on with it.'¹⁶

"A book you should read is William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, that was a book that helped me a lot at one time."¹⁷

What emerges from these and other conversations, and from the wide range of literary references in his papers, is that Wittgenstein's interest in literature, *pace* Leavis, was far from "rudimentary," and that he had an unusual range and depth of understanding.¹⁸ He read Dostoyevsky in Russian, Kierkegaard in Danish, Ibsen in Norwegian, and Augustine in Latin.¹⁹ He could detect a bad translation of a passage of Augustine's *Confessions*, and supply a better one that made the point clear.²⁰

Von Wright also tells us that Wittgenstein received "deeper impressions" from writers "in the borderlands between philosophy, religion, and poetry," and that these included:

St. Augustine, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy. The philosophical sections of St. Augustine's *Confessions* show a striking resemblance to Wittgenstein's own way of doing philosophy. Between Wittgenstein and Pascal there is a trenchant parallelism which deserves closer study. It should also be mentioned that Wittgenstein held the writings of Otto Weininger in high regard.²¹

A crucial parallel between Pascal and Wittgenstein is the importance and priority of practice, of doing, rather than the traditional privileging of theory. There is a common emphasis in Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Tolstoy on the importance of trust and faith. Their personal and confessional style suggests a greater role for the personal in philosophy, an attitude that is in sharp contrast to the objective and scientific posture of the dominant tradition. We might even say that in all these writers there is an attempt to struggle with pretension and self-deception as they struggle with philosophical problems. This is also true of Dostoyevsky; we get a very lively sense of this when we read Wittgenstein's insightful conversation with Bouwsma about "Notes from Underground," where the topic discussed is how, if at all, is it possible to write objectively about oneself.²²

Despite these important and noteworthy affinities between Wittgenstein and the writers von Wright identifies that Wittgenstein did read intensively, only two of them, Schopenhauer and Weininger, appear on the list of influences with which we began. This strongly suggests that the list is highly selective, and that the writers who were included each had some particular significance for Wittgenstein. We know that Wittgenstein had once hoped to study with Boltzmann, and there are striking parallels between Boltzmann's and Wittgenstein's conceptions of philosophy.²³ The "picture theory" of the *Tractatus* is a development of Hertzian themes.²⁴ Wittgenstein knew the opening words of Hertz's *Principles of Mechanics*, which recommend the formulation of alternative notations as a way of dissolving philosophical problems, so well that he could recite them by heart, and at one time intended to quote from them for the motto to the *Philosophical Investigations*.²⁵ Schopenhauer's influence is evident in the *Tractatus*, especially in the treatment of the will. Similarly, Russell's and Frege's work informed Wittgenstein's Tractarian approach to logic, language and mathematics. Kraus's deep respect for language, his incessant battle against journalistic abuse of language, and his perspective on this abuse as an index of cultural malaise all left a deep mark on Wittgenstein's philosophy. Loos's influence can be traced on the style of both the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* inasmuch as Loos's practice of, and writings on, architecture and aesthetics are notable for the erasure of any sort of ornament and decorative elements as inappropriate for our era. Wittgenstein's attitude to his time was affected

by Spengler's vision of the decline of the West, and his emphasis on seeing connections and the synoptic overview he aimed at have marked affinities with Spengler's methodology.²⁶ Sraffa's extended criticism of Wittgenstein is praised in the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*; while the precise nature of their conversations must remain a matter for conjecture, we do know that he mocked the Tractarian idea that every proposition has a logical form,²⁷ and would have conceived of language as a practice, not a formal system.²⁸

Why Weininger?

The issue of Weininger's connection with Wittgenstein is particularly charged because of Weininger's notoriety as the most widely read anti-Semite and antifeminist of fin-de-siècle Vienna. *Sex and Character*, published a few months before his suicide at the age of twenty-three, became a huge bestseller. The book includes an up-to-date synthesis of recent work on sexuality, a good deal of popular psychology, and an eccentric philosophical system. However, the equally important posthumous collection of essays, *Über die letzten Dinge*, was first translated into English in 2001,²⁹ and the first English translation of *Sex and Character* was not only poorly translated but also badly abridged. As a result, most Anglo-American philosophers have not been well placed to make sense of Weininger's significance for Wittgenstein, even though he enthusiastically recommended *Sex and Character* to G. E. Moore and other friends as a work of genius. With the publication of Steven Burns's translation of *On Last Things* and Ladislaus Löb's new translation of the full text of *Sex and Character*, the translation obstacles have been removed.³⁰ However, the pressing question remains: What did Wittgenstein and Weininger have in common philosophically that would illuminate the former's describing the latter as the source of "a line of thinking" that he "seized on with enthusiasm . . . for [his] work of clarification"?³¹

Weininger is an important figure for the study of literary modernism and the relationship between science and culture in the first half of the twentieth century. Both of his books were extremely widely read and went through many printings and translations. They were influential for a whole host of leading authors between the turn of the century and

Cambridge University Press

0521532604 - Wittgenstein Reads Weininger - Edited by David G. Stern and Bela Szabados

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the Second World War, and remain a subject of continuing fascination. While there is little, in our judgment, that is genuinely original or admirable about his work, there is no doubt that it was a potent distillation of many of the most powerful prejudices of his time, presented not as opinion, but as a synthesis of scientific fact and philosophical insight. *Sex and Character* is a little like a highbrow version of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* for turn of the century Vienna, with a good deal of racism, homophobia, and sexism thrown in. However, among Weininger's avid readers can be counted not only Wittgenstein, but also most of the leading literary figures of the years from 1903 to 1939, including such luminaries as Ford Maddox Ford, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Karl Kraus, Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, Gertrude Stein, and August Strindberg. More recently, *Sex and Character* has also attracted renewed attention among historians of science as a Baedeker to views about science, sexuality, and gender at the time.³² Weininger's psychoanalytic connections are another important aspect in the continuing interest in his work. Wittgenstein praised Weininger as a "remarkable genius," in part because Weininger was one of the first people outside Freud's inner circle to see "the future importance of the ideas which Freud was putting forward."³³ Quite apart from the old debate as to whether Fliess's ideas about universal bisexuality were stolen by Weininger via Freud, among the most interesting aspects of *Sex and Character* are its proto-psychoanalytic moments, such as the notion that the whore/madonna conception of Woman is the result of Man's projection: "Women have no existence and no essence; they are not, they are nothing. . . . Woman is nothing but man's expression and projection of his own sexuality."³⁴

For obvious reasons, much of the Weininger literature is devoted to the debate between those who condemn Weininger out of hand for his prejudices and those who aim to rehabilitate his reputation. The following passages, the first from a website devoted to Weininger and the second from a Wittgenstein expert's homepage, provide good examples of these opposed positions:

Sex and Character is one of the few masterpieces of modern times. In it, Weininger overflows with profound insight, deepest love, and awesome courage.³⁵

Otto Weininger, the misogynist nutcase by whom Wittgenstein was notoriously influenced.³⁶

Our approach is rather different. In addition to casting light, not only on why Weininger mattered to Wittgenstein, but also on the problems surrounding talk of “influence” in philosophy, the essays in this book contribute to the project of understanding Weininger’s reception, addressing both his cultural and intellectual significance and the fact that his work continues to provoke such extreme responses. Before turning to a review of the leading approaches to the relationship between Wittgenstein and Weininger, it will be helpful to first consider the parallels with Wittgenstein’s relationship to another controversial citizen of fin-de-siècle Vienna: Sigmund Freud. Wittgenstein told Rush Rhees that he first read Freud shortly after 1919, and from that point on “Freud was one of the few authors he thought worth reading.”³⁷ In the early 1940s Wittgenstein spoke of himself as a “disciple of Freud” and as “a follower” of Freud.³⁸ Nevertheless, he also thought of psychoanalysis as unscientific, and dangerous. Freud is full of pseudo-explanations, which are admittedly brilliant, clever, and charming – hence all the more dangerous.³⁹

Freud wanted to replace the mythology in our “explanations” of human action. Similarly, Wittgenstein wanted to see through the mythology involved in philosophical attempts to understand language: do not be taken in by the surface grammar of language, but understand it through “use.”⁴⁰ At the same time, Wittgenstein realized that Freud introduced a new mythology, which charmed and captivated, despite its unflattering nature. As McGuinness puts it, Wittgenstein “accepted and rejected Freud in equal measure, perhaps healthily.”⁴¹ His attitude to Weininger seems much the same: an attitude of ambivalence. He embraces and distances himself from Weininger in equal measure in the letter to Moore. Yet when it came to the list of influences, Wittgenstein included Weininger and left out Freud. What differences between Weininger and Freud account for this?

One response to this question starts from Freud’s strategy of arguing that things that look different are really the same. For instance, he denies that there is any real difference between normal and abnormal behavior, in that both are to be explained in terms of deep unconscious forces. Wittgenstein’s line of thinking is radically different. The following remark on Hegel is equally applicable to Freud:

Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things which look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look

Cambridge University Press

0521532604 - Wittgenstein Reads Weininger - Edited by David G. Stern and Bela Szabados

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the same are really different. I was thinking of using as a motto for my book a quotation from *King Lear*: "I'll teach you differences."⁴²

This indicates a deep difference between Weininger and Freud. While Freud thought of himself as a scientist and a reductionist, Weininger resisted both scientism and reductionism in his writings, where he insisted on differences of many kinds: between and among men and women, different temperaments, and cultures. Weininger, like Wittgenstein, was trained as a scientist, but became an antiscientific thinker, opposed to those who extend scientific methods into areas where they are inappropriate. Hence Freud gives dangerous pseudo-explanations, while Weininger and Wittgenstein accent description, and depiction of facts and practices. Again, Freud is an essentialist, trying to bring all human behavior under one explanatory rubric, while Wittgenstein is an anti-essentialist. Weininger certainly looks like an essentialist, with his quasi-Platonic definitions of opposite Types, and his purported explanation of all character in terms of the Man-Woman dichotomy, but Wittgenstein may have found in Weininger's ever-inventive discovering of new distinctions an anti-essentialist movement of thought that he wished to clarify.

Wittgenstein may also have identified with the spirit in which Weininger wrote. Wittgenstein's struggle with hypocrisy, with self-deception in oneself and one's work, his emphasis on clarity and clarification as a value in itself, and his respect for the particular case are all relevant here. In the late 1940s, Wittgenstein contrasted Weininger with Kafka in the following terms: Kafka, he said, "gave himself a great deal of trouble *not* writing about his trouble," while Weininger, "whatever his faults, was a man who really did write about his."⁴³ Weininger wrote about problems in his own life, while Freud wrote about problems in other people's lives. Weininger worked on himself as he engaged in the activity of philosophizing and psychologizing, while Freud had the disengaged posture of the scientist. So Freud's scientism, essentialism, and his captivating new mythology are not only mistakes but also personal flaws:

The less somebody knows & understands himself the less great he is, however great may be his talent. For this reason our scientists are not great. For this reason Freud, Spengler, Kraus, Einstein are not great.⁴⁴