

## A Viennese Wittgenstein? A response to Mauro Lúcio Leitão Condé

### Um Wittgenstein vienense? Uma resposta a Mauro Lúcio Leitão Condé

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It is very helpful and inspiring to read that Mauro Lúcio Leitão Condé followed a similar trajectory to me and felt an affinity for the project that constituted my PhD in his own philosophical work. How much better it would have been had we the opportunity to converse and share our ideas in the early 1980s. Too few educationalists read Wittgenstein and fewer write about the significance and relevance of his work for philosophy and education. I am very pleased to learn that Mauro Lúcio followed a similar path and framed his PhD in similar terms around the topic of rationality. I like the way in which Mauro Lúcio mentions ‘trying to read Wittgenstein by his work...counterposing to thinkers from other traditions.’ This process of reading Wittgenstein or any philosopher against another is part of the philosophy language game and often it has benefits in terms of understanding. My Hegelian interpretation was designed in part to provide an interpretation that provided a political reading but clearly it is also possible to provide many other readings (Peters, 2019): several readings exist within the analytic tradition, some at odds with one another (Hacker, 1996; Glock, 2004). His life at Cambridge provides an account of philosophy as a way of life (Peters & Stickney, 2019), a reading that acknowledges Pierre Hadot’s work. Wittgenstein can be read in relation to Viennese modernism or in relation to Nietzsche (Peters & Marshall, 1999) or Heidegger (Egan et al, 2013) or Freud (Bouveresse, 1995). This does not exhaust the list. Such readings are often involve an implicit process of reading where we need to make more obvious the ways of overcoming our own deep Gadamerian prejudices. Like Condé, in my time and place it was heresy to read Wittgenstein outside the analytic tradition.

I remember sitting around the table in the second year of my Masters in the Philosophy Department when the lecturer asked what topics I was interested in. I said immediately ‘I’m interested in the doctrine of cultural relativism in the later Wittgenstein’, not implying that I was a believer. He replied: ‘How could anyone be interested in cultural relativism. It’s such a patently undergraduate doctrine.’ He ended up by holding a course on the *Theaetetus*, no doubt to teach me a lesson. The later Wittgenstein in those days was not considered a philosopher worth studying. Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* was perfectly fine, Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* was off-limits. The lecturer concerned was actually a nice guy and a very competent epistemologist yet the episode really speaks to the significance and lasting effects of pedagogical experiences based on readings (and reading lists) and how deeply they

determine what we take as a philosophical problem and how we should approach it. I thus identify strongly with Condé's comments on what and how to read Wittgenstein and the way in those days I called the 'little Wittgensteinians' who formed a club to keep out the heretics. I found that also true of analytic philosophers of education both English and American. No matter the arguments, no matter the interpretation, Wittgenstein was taught and read as a placeholder in the analytic tradition. This is perhaps why Wittgenstein who is reputed to have detested academic philosophy said he did not wish to have followers or to form a school. Condé's comments in this regard thus really point out something fundamentally significant about pedagogy in general and how easily we dismiss ideas that do not fall within the orbit of established readings; and how different audiences *receive* interpretations. I do not think that the concept of language-game enables a proper recognition of this difference of interpretation. It really is directed at a more abstract level at 'hinge' propositions and the framework of judgements, although the problem is given some profile in talking about language-games as cultures.

As a heretic reader who did not want to play the analytic game with Wittgenstein and someone who got a little bored with the disputes of readings of concepts, I became infatuated with Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin's (1973) path-breaking book *Wittgenstein's Vienna* that interpreted Wittgenstein as an Austrian philosopher of the counter-Enlightenment who had more in common with Karl Krauss, Oswald Spengler, Fritz Mauthner, Otto Weininger, Sigmund Freud, Adolf Loos, Viktor Adler and Arnold Schoenberg and the other Austrian intellectuals on the collapse of the corrupt Austro-Hungarian Empire. *Fin de siecle* Vienna and Viennese modernism were the ground upon which Janik and Toulmin found another Wittgenstein reading as a very different narrative from the analytic view. This is not to deny the significance of Russell, of Frege, or Wittgenstein's time at Cambridge. But in contrast Janik and Toulmin's interpretation made immediate sense to me and it encouraged me to divert from the path of the righteous. Toulmin's (1972) *Human Understanding* was one of my favourite books at the time because it provided 'a critique of collective reason' and as he says 'the collective use of the evolution of concepts'. The book was to examine 'the rational adequacy and appraisal of concepts' to demonstrate their rationality was not due to the order of concepts in formal structures but 'by the preparedness to respond to novel situations with open minds' (p. viii). Toulmin was a British philosopher who had the rare distinction of being a student of both Wittgenstein and the physicist Dirac. Why I was drawn to his work was possibly due to the fact that against formal logic drawn from Plato's absolute truth, he believed truth was dependent on historical and cultural contexts. Allan Janik, whose work I knew less well, railed against the fusty accounts of Wittgenstein work, as he says of 'Pears' account of the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy is the same, old, slightly less than enlightening, version of the mythical Wittgenstein, which was conceived by Russell, nurtured by the Vienna Circle, and sustained by a segment of Anglo-Saxon philosophers for the last forty-five-odd years.'<sup>1</sup> Is this what it means to be a philosopher who mounts a heretical reading? Certainly, the philosophical establishment has ways and means that fall outside the uses of argument to disassemble or to disqualify that which does not abide by the rules.

I was struck by the Viennese Wittgenstein that Janik and Toulmin proposed – it established a reading that disrupted the prevailing orthodox reading and led the way to see (aspect-seeing) Wittgenstein in terms of a different perspective, one that tied the origins of his thought to aspects of his biography of growing up in Vienna at the turn of the century. This constituted a fundamental insight for me and became part of the effort to read Wittgenstein

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1969/07/10/wittgensteins-strategy-2/>

against Viennese modernism and Nietzsche (as both ‘philosophers of the future’ and ‘pedagogical philosophers’) (Peters, 2020).

Condé gets it absolutely correct, probably because he is a fellow-traveller, the motivation for a reading of Wittgenstein that dislodged analytic universalistic readings of rationality. I felt as a young New Zealander, someone from the periphery of the world system and a citizen of an ex-British colony, a certain smugness that accompanied an armchair analysis of rationality that legislated for all humanity. I am hearted by Condé analysis and the accuracy of the reading of my project—again the result of a fellow-traveller’s experiences.

Condé divergence from me to consider Wittgenstein’s “continental turn” ‘exchanging Hegel and Gadamer for Wittgenstein himself’ is also a welcome intervention: as he writes:

I thus argue that the notions of language games, grammar and form of life constitute the framework of our habits, customs and institutions (Wittgenstein, 2008, §§ 142, 199, 202, 226, 227), establishing therein the contingency of knowledge and the historicity of a form of life.

I like this interpretation and it sheds light on Wittgenstein by investigating the possibility of a grammar of history. I think it is a genuine step forward and I would encourage Condé to pursue this reading (which I would like to help publish), nicely summarised in the following formulation:

The grammar of history situates us in space and time. Consequently, it establishes the contours of all our interpretative (hermeneutical) possibilities. In other terms, the grammar of history is the historical apparatus or the “system of reference” (*Bezugssystem*) (Wittgenstein, 2008, § 206) that situates us historically.

Interpretation is an unsurpassable horizon for philosophers, except for those willing to work within the parameters of established interpretative frameworks, that points to the historicity of philosophy itself. It is a step beyond explication and textual exegesis to build an argument based on reflections and likenesses, a form of philosophical ‘aspect-seeing’ or seeing-as not limited to perception and visual experience but based on interpretative understanding that requires an imaginative leap of faith which then can be seen as one of the ways in which different strategies of reading and criticism come to shape how we see, act and embody our knowledge.

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