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Anna Boncompagni. *Wittgenstein and Pragmatism. On Certainty in the Light of Peirce and James*. **London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 311 + xv pages. $63 Hardcover. ISBN 978-1-137-58846-3.**

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Review: *Wittgenstein and Pragmatism.* On Certainty *in the Light of Peirce and James*, by Anna Boncompagni

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In *On Certainty* (OC) Wittgenstein writes "So I am trying to say something that sounds like pragmatism. Here I am being thwarted by a kind of *Weltanschauung*" (422). Anna Boncompagni's book is a heroic attempt to place this remark in a much wider context of differences and similarities between Wittgenstein's views, from 1929 to 1951, and those of William James and Charles Sanders Peirce.

The attempt is heroic because it is difficult both from a philological point of view and from a philosophical point of view. As is well known, Wittgenstein had read James, but his direct knowledge of Peirce's writings is dubious, while he was certainly exposed to his ideas indirectly as they had influenced James but also Russell and Ramsey with whom Wittgenstein had fruitful conversations, since his return to Cambridge in 1929. From a theoretical point of view too, the comparison is difficult, because similarities might conceal deep and irresolvable differences, and because similarities depend, at times, on specific interpretations of Wittgenstein's own ideas, on which there is no clear consensus. Such are the dangers of comparativism anyway, and Anna Boncompagni manages to engage in this difficult exercise with wisdom and prudence. The result is insightful and thought provoking overall, despite inevitable points of disagreement.

The book is divided into three parts, preceded by an Introduction. The first part, "Before *On Certainty*", looks at Wittgenstein's engagement with pragmatism from 1929 to 1949. It emerges that Wittgenstein had read several of James' writings and that he was at least familiar with some of Peirce's. He was critical of James' conception of truth in terms of what is useful and was interested in the relevance of use to meaning. Here Boncompagni convincingly claims that pragmatists too had widened the gaze from usefulness to use and therefore that Wittgenstein was broadly in agreement with their perspective, although he insisted on the connection between use and meaning rather than between use and truth. This, however, is no small a difference. For it entails the rejection of the theory of meaning endorsed by Pierce, which was a strong form of interpretationism, and of James' insistence on phenomenology at least with respect to mentalistic vocabulary.

The second part, "*On Certainty*", consists of three chapters, which analyze the analogies of that work with pragmatist reflections, regarding the role of doubt in philosophy, the status of hinges, the understanding of common sense, the notion of *Weltbild*, and the role of action. The most convincing analogy that emerges (although, to my knowledge, it had already been explored by Claudine Tiercelin in her *Le doute en question* (2005)) is the one between Wittgenstein's reflections on doubt and those of Peirce. Both of them were critical of purely philosophical or notional doubts, which had no actual motivation and no consequence in practice. Hence, they both criticized Descartes for putting doubt first, in philosophy, when it can only make sense on the backdrop of a shared language and of communal epistemic practices—thus, on the background of taking for granted the existence of physical objects and of epistemic methods to ascertain their natures, properties and mutual relations. Yet, while Peirce was interested in the role of doubt in science, as a powerful propellant to inquiry, Wittgenstein was quite indifferent to its positive role within that kind of context.

Boncompagni devotes a few pages to the rejection of infallibilism, which is a common element between Wittgenstein and Peirce. Surely, Wittgenstein thought that any empirical proposition, even those we claim to know with good reasons on our side, is in principle falsifiable and claims to knowledge defeasi-

ble. Yet, the crucial point is that hinges, for him, are not empirical propositions and our relation to them is not epistemic. *Qua* certainties, they stand fast for us and are recalcitrant to revision. If they are revised over time, or by changing context, it is because they have lost their role of certainties and have become empirical propositions, or are no longer hinges, in the new context. This distinction—in kind, not in degree—between what is empirical and what is grammatical, and therefore between what is the object of belief, knowledge and doubt and between what is susceptible to falsification and what is not, finds no echo in Peirce (or James, for that matter). In particular, Peirce's indubitables are beliefs, which have been fossilized by habit, which are not categorially distinct from ordinary empirical propositions, and which may be revised, as such, by science. Thus, contrary to Wittgenstein's distinction between hinges and empirical propositions, between indubitables and hypotheses (to use a piece of pragmatist terminology) there is a difference in degree, not in kind. Boncompagni recognizes this deep difference between Wittgenstein's and the pragmatists' approaches later on in the book, but she also tends to favor those interpretations of hinges that stress that, *qua* hinges, they show themselves *only* in action. This is a point on which there is no agreement among Wittgenstein scholars and the risks of this interpretation are evident. On the one hand, it may invite an overstatement of the similarities between Wittgenstein and pragmatists and, on the other, it sits badly with Wittgenstein's insistence on the grammatical and rule-like nature of these *propositions*. This, for better or for worse, is the innovative aspect of his epistemology, which sees justification and knowledge as grounded in propositions that are categorially different from the ones grounded in them. Of course, as always in the later Wittgenstein, use and practice determine which propositions fall on either side of the empirical/grammatical divide. This, however, is not to say that the grammatical is the merely practical, or simply a form of know how. Having embraced the most pragmatic reading of Wittgensteinian hinges on offer, then

it is small surprise that affinities with James and Pierce appear in abundance. Still, that very interpretation is contentious. Indeed, Wittgenstein himself, any time he felt to be on the verge of espousing it, expressed deep dissatisfaction with it (cf. OC 358, and 422 itself).

The consequences of that distinction are crucial to an understanding of Wittgenstein's views about the relationship between science and philosophy too, as science is, for him, the highest form of investigation of the empirical domain, and philosophy deals with the grammatical—in the extended sense in which, by the time of OC, Wittgenstein recognized a grammatical role not only to propositions like "An object cannot be of two different lengths at once", but also to "This is my hand" (in the appropriate context), or to "Nobody has ever been on the moon" (stated in 1949), or to "The Earth has existed for a long time". I will come back to this issue shortly.

The third part, "Broadening the Perspective", contains two chapters, one on the relevance to epistemology of the notion of background, rather than of ground, and one on the understanding of pragmatism either as a method or as a *Weltanschauung*. The book ends with a Conclusion, titled "I'll teach you differences", which summarizes the main points of convergence and of difference between Wittgenstein and pragmatism.

This part of the book aims at offering an overall understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy and of the alternative *Weltanschauung* he embraced, which set him apart from pragmatists. The chapter on the role of background, identified with Wittgenstein's notion of form of life, as the basis for epistemology is, in my view, unconvincing. Surely, Wittgenstein insisted on the contingency of our *Weltbild*, but a *Weltbild* is not a form of life for him (cf. OC 358). *Weltbild* is the system of hinges we endorse; a form of life, in contrast, includes much more than that, for it contains biological and cultural aspects. In particular, it includes all our language games, and the whole of them, not just their hinges. Failing to appreciate this crucial difference, Boncompagni em-

barks on a long discussion of issues such as epistemic relativism, which she conflates with the idea of the possibility of intercultural dialogue, the topic of persuasion and the ethical dimension of a form of life. She then ventures to say that the notion of form of life is a "methodological a priori", when again Wittgenstein would, I think, never endorse the view that a form of life is *a priori*, in any respectable sense of the term. Rather, it is only by espousing the idea of a *Weltbild* composed of rule-like propositions, that we could salvage a role for the *a priori* in his later philosophy.

Finally, in the last chapter, Boncompagni rightly stresses that it is on the relationship between science and philosophy that the most fundamental divergence between Wittgenstein and the pragmatists emerges. For the latter thought that the two were continuous and could profitably interact with one another, while Wittgenstein rejected that view. Yet, this is no accident and it is not merely a reflection of a different sensibility, or of a different *Weltanschauung*. Rather, in Wittgenstein, it stems from adherence to the, albeit revisited, distinction between *a priori/a posteriori* and from the conviction that the methods and aims of the two disciplines are profoundly different. While science rightly, in Wittgenstein's view, concerns itself with the discovery of the ultimate and often hidden causes of physical phenomena, aims at producing scientific laws, it is cumulative and animated by the idea of progress, philosophy aims at clarifying the nature of our concepts, which are deployed in our language. Nothing is hidden from view. Rather, it is by being constantly immersed in our language and by being oblivious to the differences that characterize our various language games, particularly those in which we use the very same words (e.g., proposition, meaning, truth, belief, knowledge, certainty, etc.) that we run the risk of offering a distorted representation of them. That is why philosophy should aim at offering synoptic or perspicuous descriptions. But these descriptions are not just discursive representations of what we do in practice, and a philosopher is not just someone better

trained at describing a peculiar kind of landscape. A landscape that conceals the multiplicity under the superficial similarity of the words and syntactic formulations we use. Rather, among the things we should realize, by applying this method, is that there are propositions, which are not like empirical ones (and yet are still propositions), with respect to which if we say we know them, we are making a grammatical remark (rather than an epistemic one), and that play a regulative role with respect to our language and epistemic practices. Thus, we cannot sensibly call them into doubt, not because they are infallible or certain in any epistemic sense, but because they themselves make it possible to speak a language and to raise sensible doubts. A good philosopher is therefore someone who ultimately recognizes the different *function* the same words or twists of phrase have, in different contexts, varying from empirical to grammatical, and thereby shows what is right and what is wrong in previous philosophical theorizing on the relevant phenomena. Thus, common sense, *à la* Moore or *à la* Peirce, is right in not being moved by skeptical doubts, but it is wrong in thinking that we bear an epistemic relation to these propositions, or that they are the object of belief consolidated by habit and revisable by scientific progress. Skepticism, in its turn, is right in showing that we do not bear an epistemic relation to them, but is wrong in concluding that we should remain agnostic with respect to them.

Finally, I think it is important to stress that Wittgenstein was not against science *per se*, or against its methods and aims. He was against modeling philosophy after science and was critical of scientism—that is, of the idea that science provides the model for any kind of understanding. Scientism was the threat he felt in the spirit of his time and to which he wanted to resist by embracing a *Weltanschauung* that could maintain a place for different aims and methodologies in at least some aspect of human inquiry. In philosophy, the embracement of that *Weltanschauung* went hand in hand with the strenuous defense of the categorial difference between the grammatical and the empirical. Pragmatism with

its faith in science and progress endorsed, *qua* philosophy and for philosophy, the very *Weltanschauung* Wittgenstein wanted to oppose in that realm. No wonder he claimed to be "thwarted" by it. To insist on a pragmatist Wittgenstein then tends to hinder the possibility of understanding what he was really after. It remains that through a meticulous and perceptive comparison, such as the one presented by Anna Boncompagni in her book, important analogies and crucial differences emerge.

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