

The Wittgenstein Controversy

The dispute over the first complete edition of the philosopher's papers is as petty and academic as Wittgenstein himself was high-minded and profound

MICHAEL Nedo, the director of the Wittgenstein Archive, in Cambridge, England, is a happy man. The archive is deeply in debt, the building is in dire need of repair, and complications in Austrian politics have delayed any chance of getting further funding. But Nedo is at last

on the way to accomplishing what he set out to do more than two decades ago: he has issued six volumes of Ludwig Wittgenstein's papers, in exactly the form and sequence that Wittgenstein wrote them, and several more volumes are in preparation.

This is the first time since the philoso-

pher's death, in 1951, that anything he wrote has been published in unaltered, unedited form. As Nedo puts it, "Wittgenstein's own connections,

which he himself called the most important thing in his work, have been restored." One might expect a certain amount of scholarly rejoicing. But the saga of these papers, and of Nedo's beleaguered edition in particular, is so fraught with petty squabbling and bad blood that except for reviewers in the nonacademic press, nobody has mustered even one faint cheer.

Not that such wrangling over the papers of dead philosophers is as rare as one might expect. Ever since Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche edited her brother's final manuscripts (and in some cases actually forged whole passages) to reflect her own anti-Semitic and fascist views, it

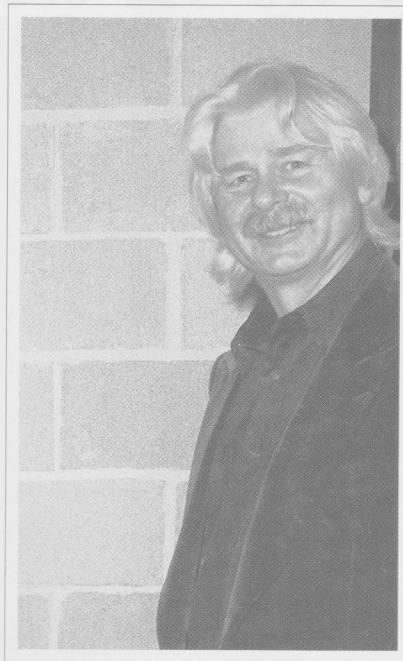
Above, Ludwig Wittgenstein and an autograph page from the Philosophical Investigations

has become almost a tradition in the philosophical community to suspect the editors, colleagues, or relatives of philosophers of nefarious behavior with their literary remains. Thus rumors abound concerning the manuscripts of Charles Sanders Peirce, George Santayana, and Martin Heidegger, to name just a few.

Yet the Wittgenstein wars seem especially unfortunate, if only because Wittgenstein himself was a moral purist of the highest order: a man who abandoned all the worldly honors—and worldly goods—that had been bestowed on him in order to lead what he called a “decent” life. After serving as a volunteer soldier in the armies of his native Austria during the First World War, he gave away the vast fortune he had inherited and spent years teaching peasant children in the poorest of alpine villages. Having tried and failed to get work as an ambulance driver at the front during the Second World War, he left his professorship at Trinity College, Cambridge, to serve as a porter in a London hospital. If his genius inspired reverence in the likes of Bertrand Russell and John Maynard Keynes, his personal history has made him a hero even to some who hardly know his work.

The fate of his manuscripts is also distressing because of the ratio of what he published to what he left behind. Such was his perfectionism that during his lifetime he published only a single book, of seventy-four pages. This was the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), which altered the practice of philosophy, perhaps forever, by calling into question the ability of language to talk about ethical and metaphysical questions in any meaningful way. Wittgenstein maintained that language could only *show*; it

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could not *say* anything that went beyond description: “Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but senseless. . . . Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” To establish the limits of what could be spoken of, he stripped language down to its logical structure, which he saw as mirroring that of reality.

Believing that the *Tractatus* had cleared up all the confusions that “tormented” philosophy, Wittgenstein decided it would never be necessary for him to write anything further. After his six-year stint as a schoolteacher, he worked for a time as an undergardener in a monastery, and seriously considered becoming a monk. But in 1929 some of his Cambridge admirers—chief among them Keynes, who occasionally referred to Wittgenstein as “God”—persuaded him to return to the university to teach, and he began to rethink the problems he thought he had solved. Though he was adamantly opposed to their being widely circulated, a set of notes he dictated to his students during the thirties once again spawned whole new lines of philosophical inquiry.

In those notes—designated the *Blue and Brown Books*, after the colors of the notebooks in which they were first taken down—Wittgenstein abandoned his earlier quest for a logically perfect language

to consider how language acquires meaning through use, the multiple ways it functions “in the stream of life.” When the *Blue and Brown Books* were passed around, in crudely stenciled form, the general view was that he had revolutionized philosophy for the second time, although some claimed that he had killed it for the second time—by rendering permanently suspect any writing about the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Apart from his work on language, he also wrote about the foundations of mathematics, about color, and about the idea of certainty. When he died of cancer, at the age of sixty-two, he bequeathed nearly 30,000 pages of manuscript—many of them handwritten, almost all in German—to three of his former students, with instructions to publish “as many of my unpublished writings as they think fit.” It was, on the face of it, a simple enough request. But as soon as his trustees began issuing posthumous volumes, the accusations started flying.

FACED with a huge mass of repetitive, unwieldy material that, in Wittgenstein’s characteristic style, mostly took the form of discrete remarks rather than sequential argument, the trustees struggled to give it a conventional linear form. Whole chapters were omitted, with connections provided by passages from unrelated manuscripts; paragraphs written many years apart might appear on the same page. “A medley of materials from different sources, which were never intended by Wittgenstein to go together,” one scholar thundered, while a reviewer called another volume “simply useless for scholarly studies of the development of Wittgenstein’s thought.”

The trustees’ motives were also impugned, if not in print then in a hundred faculty lounges. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, the chairman of the philosophy department at Dartmouth, and one of the more genial of the trustees’ critics, says, “There were several ex-students of Wittgenstein’s who made careers out of lecturing on the mysterious ‘unknown writings’ that nobody else had seen. The trustees hung on to their power by doling out information in dribs and drabs, while refusing people access to the manuscripts.”

Professor Jaakko Hintikka, of Boston University, exempts one of the trustees,

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Georg Henrik von Wright, from blame, but questions the motives of the other two: "Only a psychiatrist could say what Rush Rhees and Elizabeth Anscombe were really trying to accomplish. Their whole identity was vested in being Wittgenstein's interpreters. If everybody had access to his papers, their own interpretations might have been disproved."

The issue of access was a sore point for years, especially when the trustees permitted a microfilm version of the manuscripts to be issued but put strips of white paper over certain coded personal remarks. Conjecture about Wittgenstein's philosophical positions was accompanied by even more rampant conjecture about his sex life, particularly after one scholar published a book alleging that Wittgenstein had compulsively cruised a park in Vienna, picking up homosexual toughs, while he was training to be a teacher. (Although the scholar's evidence was later convincingly refuted, such stories continue to circulate.)

But things really heated up only in the seventies, when the trustees did what so many in the philosophical community had been urging all along: they authorized a complete edition of the manuscripts. At this point Michael Nedo became involved.

As a young physics student at the University of Tübingen, in Germany, Nedo had developed a passionate admiration for Wittgenstein. This prompted him to write to Rush Rhees querying a discrepancy in one of the diagrams of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), the most important of the posthumous volumes and the only one that Wittgenstein himself had prepared for publication (though the trustees appended another manuscript to the work when

it was published, thereby provoking more criticism). After initially claiming that the mistake had appeared in Wittgenstein's version, too, something that Nedo doggedly insisted was impossible, Rhees checked the original manuscript and discovered that Nedo was right. The two men embarked on a long correspondence about the problems with the printed volumes, and when the time came to appoint someone to oversee the transcription of the papers, Nedo, who had gone on to do graduate work in physics and zoology and was a researcher at the Max Planck Institute, was chosen. He put together a team of philosophers to help him, and the project was launched, with a small grant, at Tübingen. Originally Nedo saw his work on the papers as something he could do part-time while pursuing his own scientific research, but it soon became evident that this was impossible, and he devoted himself to the edition.

What happened next may have been caused partly by resentment among the philosophers: Nedo had no professional qualifications in philosophy, yet he had been placed in charge. Or it may have been the result of Nedo's combination of obsessiveness, absentmindedness, and lack of regard for such things as schedules and budgets. At any rate, the philosophers questioned his fitness for the task, and questioned it even more strenuously when he refused to let them write their own scholarly footnotes to the edition—he wanted it to consist of Wittgenstein's words alone. Finally, a full-scale mutiny broke out, with the philosophers impugning both Nedo's character and his competence, and hinting, among other things, that his Ph.D.s in physics and zoology were fictitious.

The trustees, however, gave their support to Nedo and the contract that he had signed with them. Although this only increased the hostility in the philosophical community, the day was saved for the pure-text edition. The project was transferred from Tübingen to Trinity College, Cambridge, and Nedo uprooted himself and moved to England.

At that point 15,000 pages of manuscript had already been transcribed from Wittgenstein's hand, but the computer disks disappeared at the time of the anti-Nedo crusade. Various lawsuits and countersuits were set in motion; it turned out that Nedo's former colleagues had

smuggled the 15,000 pages to Norway, where the Norwegian Wittgenstein Project, a group of Norwegian scholars, sought to produce a computer-readable edition. The story goes that Anscombe demanded the disks back, and the Norwegians refused to return them; supposedly, the disks are still sitting in a bank vault somewhere in Norway, though no one will admit to knowing where. In 1991 another Norwegian team, this time at the University of Bergen, was granted permission to produce a CD-ROM version, which is scheduled to appear toward the end of the year.

Meanwhile, Nedo began the process of transcription all over again, and promised to have the edition ready for the centenary of Wittgenstein's birth, in 1989. But by the late 1980s, when Rush Rhees died, Nedo had still not published a single volume. He had several ready, he says, but the trustees were not satisfied with their typographic quality, a problem he ascribes to the shortage of funds and to the difficulties the manuscripts presented: an idiosyncratic notational system, myriad cross-references, and an unconventional structure. "The structure of the manuscripts themselves was especially complicated," Nedo says, "because Wittgenstein's thinking and writing were very musical, so you have structures and forms that are more common to music than to texts. When he comes to the borderline of his language, his sentences often break apart; one sentence ends and he produces a parallel second sentence that somehow oscillates around the idea of the first. These sets of sentences remind one of a partita where, in order to express something, one has to use different tunes."

Nedo devoted a great deal of time to designing a typographic format that would make for a readable text, and he insisted on having special software developed that would allow many different variants to be presented simultaneously, with each given a different weight. In his view, such time-consuming efforts were justified by the result: the software that he and Desmond Schmidt, a Cambridge Ph.D. in classical philology, developed at the archive is infinitely more sophisticated, Nedo says, than anything developed elsewhere, and could be used for all sorts of scholarly editorial projects.

But while Anscombe continued to sup-

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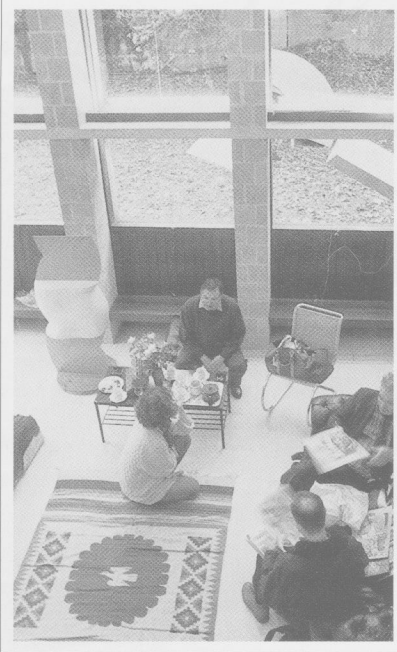
port Nedo, his critics argued that more-complex texts had successfully been transcribed and transferred to the computer in a much shorter time. Jaakko Hintikka, the most vocal of this group, accused Nedo of misrepresenting his progress on grant applications and of having wasted years and vast sums of money by failing "to use any of the available resources for the purpose of software development." In an article in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, Anthony Kenny, one of the two men appointed by the other trustees to replace Rush Rhees, claimed that Nedo had spent "long periods of time designing software for formatting the pages to be printed according to his own taste."

By the time Nedo was finally ready to publish his first volume, the trustees had withdrawn their support for his edition. He was deprived of his fellowship and his elegant office at Trinity, and his contract for publication of the papers was revoked. It was expected that he would give up on the project entirely. But such a thing seems never to have occurred to Nedo, whose belief in the importance of the edition is absolute: "In such impoverished times as these, when creativity has virtually collapsed, all we have to guide us is what was produced by the great minds of the past; only by cherishing these things, and making them available as they were written, can we hope to climb out of the mess we are in." He set about finding his own funding, his own premises, and his own publisher.

TODAY the Wittgenstein Archive is housed in an austere concrete building on a Cambridge side street, lent to Nedo by the noted British architect Colin St. John Wilson. The garden around the place is decidedly overgrown, there being no money for maintenance; the operation's budget is being shored up by an overdraft from the bank and by a mortgage that Nedo took out on his own house. But the reviews of his edition (known as the Wiener Ausgabe, the Vienna Edition, because it is published by Springer Verlag, of Vienna) have been glowing.

A piece that appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1995 praised the Vienna Edition for "combining readability with accuracy, elegance with lavish detail. It will be a valuable source to scholars, an

RICHARD EINZIG



The archive's austere interior and neglected garden

example to philologists, and a pleasure to bibliophiles. . . . It discharges an immensely difficult and ambitious task."

A review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* further observed, "The existing bilingual editions of Wittgenstein exaggerate the break between his earlier and later thought. The *Vienna Edition*, austere beautiful in its large format, promises to restore the inner continuity of Wittgenstein's philosophy."

In fact, one of Nedo's chief purposes is to convince people, through publication of the crucial "transitional" manuscripts of 1929–1933, that the *Philosophical Investigations* is not a direct repudiation of the *Tractatus*, as is almost universally believed, but a matter of going from general to specific rules about language. Nedo points out that Wittgenstein himself wanted the two books to be published in a single volume, with an epigraph reading "It's generally the way with progress that it looks much greater than it really is." He also insists that the repetitions in the manuscripts are by no means superfluous but rather are crucial to an understanding of Wittgenstein's thought; placed in a different context, the same remark becomes something quite different. Again, he quotes Wittgenstein: "In philosophy matters are not simple enough for us to say 'Let's get a rough idea,' for we do not know the country except by

knowing the connections between the roads. So I suggest repetition as a means of surveying the connections."

Finally, Nedo hopes that his edition will convince people of the importance of Wittgenstein's work on the foundations of mathematics and the moral implications it has for scientists. Here, too, he supports his view with a quotation from Wittgenstein; when asked during the forties to comment on an entry about him in a biographical dictionary, the philosopher added just one sentence: "Wittgenstein's chief contribution has been in the philosophy of mathematics."

But if Nedo is content that the Vienna Edition—which he wants to extend to include all Wittgenstein's writings, along with a concordance to the manuscripts—is at last making it possible to understand "the complex structure of Wittgenstein's thought," his academic detractors are far from granting him the point. After years of complaining bitterly about Nedo's delays, many have decided that his edition is superfluous anyway; rather than wading through page after page of repetitive text, they await the search capabilities and cross-referencing potential of the complete CD-ROM version.

Logical though this sounds, it is a little suspect that few of Michael Nedo's critics seem to have been curious enough even to look at the Vienna Edition—as though, if they were actually to see it, they might have to give Nedo some credit after all. Indeed, the professors sometimes seem more interested in airing their grievances than in talking about anything Wittgenstein himself may have written.

And that, of course, is the great irony here—that a man whose own preoccupations were so fiercely high-minded

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should have spawned such an orgy of pettiness. But then, it is a gloomy fact that since his death Wittgenstein seems to have become the victim of everything he hated most. This is true not only in the academy but also among all the legions of his supposed admirers. Having made it his moral purpose to "clarify the use of our language," he is the subject of some of the most impenetrable prose ever written. Having warred against pretentiousness of every kind, he is routinely hauled in to lend credence to some of the most pretentious cultural artifacts of our time.

In the art world especially, where conceptual artists have adopted him as their guru, he seems doomed to a perpetual afterlife of misappropriation. Thus a piece consisting of four sheets of glass propped up against a gallery wall, with the words CLEAR SQUARE GLASS LEANING written on them, is called by the artist a "Proposition," after those of the *Tractatus*, and is said to "work with Ludwig Wittgenstein's analytic philosophy of language" to "stimulate the spiritual faculties of the individual as a dialectical, culturally located counterpart." Works that consist of the scrawled or flashing words "Pay attention mother fuckers" and "Fuck and live. Suck and die" are claimed by a curator at the Museum of Modern Art to go "directly to the heart of the existential problem Wittgenstein's inquiries pose. . . . Nauman's [the artist's] method has much in common with that of Ludwig Wittgenstein. . . . Whether videos, neons, drawings, prints or spatial constructions, each of his works asks the same question: how does being resonate in language?"

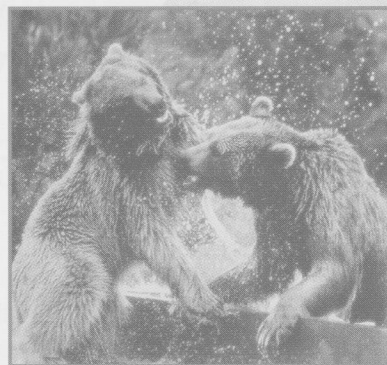
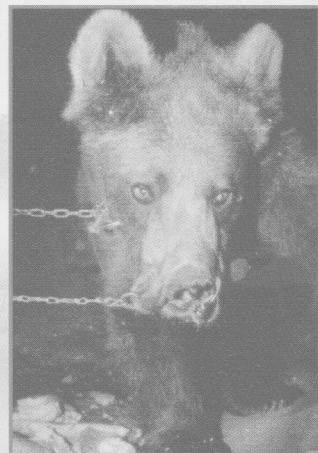
The uninitiated viewer may have trouble seeing how a Bruce Nauman work called *Shit in Your Hat—Head on a Chair* asks that question. Equally, it is hard to fathom why a neon sign that said RUN FROM FEAR. FUN FROM REAR is said to have been praised by a critic for its "Wittgensteinian synchronicity." Such, however, are the uses of philosophy in our time.

It seems unlikely that the Vienna Edition—or the CD-ROM version of the manuscripts, for that matter—will deter this sort of thing, any more than it will stop the philosophers from grumbling. But at least it will finally be possible, for those who are interested, to find out exactly what Wittgenstein said, and when he said it. ☞

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